

Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era

Editors

Ammar Khashan and Clovis Bergère

Asia-Japan Research Institute
Ritsumeikan University

AJI BOOKS

**Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production
in the New Era**

Editors

Ammar Khashan and Clovis Bergère

**Asia-Japan Research Institute
Ritsumeikan University**

ISBN 978-4-910550-57-2 (Online)

ISBN 978-4-910550-56-5 (Print)

Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era

AJI Editorial Office
OIC Research Office,
Ritsumeikan University Osaka Ibaraki Campus (OIC)
2-150 Iwakura-cho, Ibaraki,
Osaka 567-8570 JAPAN
Email: aji-eb@st.ritsumei.ac.jp

Copyright © 2026 Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University

Note:

Authors' names in this publication are ordered and capitalized according to their preference.

Contents

Editors' Preface

Ammar Khashan and Clovis Bergère iv

Contributors xii

Part One: Languages in Motion

Chapter 1. Arabic Language, Mobility, and Cross-border
Networking of Shinqiti Intellectuals: Mauritania, the Arab Gulf,
and Beyond in the Globalized World

Toshiyuki TAKEDA 1

Chapter 2. From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South
Research: Reflections from Guinea

Clovis Bergère 17

Chapter 3. Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic,
Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

Ammar Khashan 33

Part Two: Knowledge and Responsibility

Chapter 4. Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?
Language, AI, and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

Ammar Khashan 56

Chapter 5. Theorizing from the Global South: From Critique to
Reconstruction in Postcolonial Social Theory

Hasan Mahmud 77

Chapter 6. From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical
Subjectivity: Relationality in Japanese Thought from Nishida
Kitarō to Nakamura Yūjirō

Nobuyuki Matsui 103

Editors' Preface

Producing a single volume on language, mobility, and knowledge production in the new era, sailing across a sea of languages, fed by rivers of histories and cultures, is no mean feat. The contributors' diverse specialties add yet another dimension. We were not unaware of the challenges we faced, and we hope that the wide-ranging perspectives bound together in this volume will serve their purpose: a broader and deeper understanding of how knowledge production in our increasingly global, connected, and technological era requires navigating *across*, *between*, and *within* rapidly changing linguistic fields.

The six chapters gathered here draw on ethnography, media and cultural studies, comparative reflection, sociology, and philosophy. One describes a nomadic school producing remarkable scholars as it traverses the Sahara; another a neural network whose competence in every language is the accumulated labor of generations of human translators, absorbed without citing their names. What binds such distant neighbors into one book is a single question, put in one form or another to every page we edited: When knowledge moves across languages, what is it that moves, what carries it, what does the crossing cost, and who answers for what arrives on the other side?

The title, "Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era," which the volume inherited from the symposium where it was born, names the terms of that question. Language is the medium. Mobility is the condition under which knowledge now lives. Production insists that someone, somewhere, in some tongue, is doing the making; and the new era, as we understand it, began the moment that the carriers of meaning started to change faster than the traditional processes that readers had learned to trust.

The background to this book's birth deserves an explanation. On

July 11, 2023, the NUQ-RU Global Symposium met under the very title this volume carries; organized in cooperation with the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar, it was the seedbed of everything printed here. This symposium was the culmination of a chain of academic cooperation between the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University and Northwestern University, particularly its campus in Qatar, conducted under a partnership agreement between the two institutions within the framework of their membership in the Meridian 180 network. A joint academic meeting held in 2022 had been an earlier link in the same chain; this book is the fruit of a later one. Its appearance was delayed until 2026. The years the manuscript waited were, as it happened, the years in which machine translation left specialist literature and entered the daily life of scholarship, and this volume gained a new chapter in response to this new dimension.

Thus we have published this work at a peculiar hour, an hour when scholarship is passing through a renewal and a trial simultaneously. A researcher may now consult, albeit with some loss, works written in dozens of languages, and a draft can cross a linguistic border in minutes. The gain is real, but the process has loosened old certainties about who is speaking in a translated sentence, and about who remains answerable for “what is attributed to whom” when the mediator has no name and the route between languages leaves no trace. Neither celebration nor alarm strikes us as the appropriate editorial response. We record the conditions in which the book was completed, and we leave the arguments to the chapters that convey them in detail, with their evidence and in their own voices.

The arrangement of the chapters is the order of an argument. The book moves from the oldest register of linguistic mobility toward the newest, and from the ground upward: the first three chapters stay close

to persons who carry languages in their own biographies, while the remaining three step back to ask what the crossing has become now that machines perform it, then where concepts come from and who gets to make them, and at last what the self that speaks and knows might be. Three of the six are by the editors. We have tried to weigh them here exactly as we weigh the rest.

Toshiyuki Takeda opens the volume in Mauritania, and the choice of opening is itself a statement. For most of recorded time, knowledge moved because people moved. The *maḥḍara* he describes is a school in motion: a tent, a teacher, students who followed him from pasture to pasture, a curriculum copied by hand onto wooden boards and recited until it settled in the memory, where it traveled free of luggage. Takeda follows the scholars this institution formed, the Shinqīṭīs, out of the Sahara and across the modern Arab world. One of them appears in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's memoir of al-Azhar, remembered for his formidable learning and memory; and when the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, building new schools and institutions, went looking for masters of Arabic and the transmitted sciences, it was often these desert-trained teachers they found. In the society he describes, a confident command of the standard, literary Arabic is taken as a sign of learning. Mastery of that more erudite language has long worked there as a credential; it opened al-Azhar to one generation and the Gulf to another, and it gives the book its first answer to the question of carriers: for centuries, knowledge moved inside trained human memory, with a name and a lineage attached.

In the second chapter, with Clovis Bergère, the book crosses to Guinea, and the scale changes from the caravan to the interview. His chapter begins, disarmingly, with a Taiwanese historical novel that disguises itself as a translation, footnotes, afterwords and all. The disguise turns out to be an argument: nothing in the passage of words between languages is innocent, least of all the apparatus that pretends

to be technical. Bergère then turns to his own practice. For thirty years he has done fieldwork in Guinea, interviewing in French while daily life around him runs in Pular, with Susu and Maninka crossing into both. Out of this he draws an ethics of the crossing. Translation is an encounter between languages, and an encounter can be conducted as domination or as hospitality; the Fula code of *Pulaaku*, which teaches a host to leave the guest alone with the offered meal, gives him a figure for what hospitable translation might be in scholarly practice. He practices what he proposes. Rather than bend a Mande word to a Greek-derived concept, he lets the word *dundunba* stand untranslated in his prose and asks his readers to come to it, an ordinary act of writing in which the whole argument is contained; and whereas colonial order produced diglossia, with one language ranking above another, he asks what working multilingualism would require of scholarship.

The third chapter carries the question into a stranger pairing, and it is the second of the three that belong to the editors. Ammar Khashan writes from a life conducted between Arabic and Japanese, languages with no family relation and scripts that run in opposite directions, and he asks what a meaning must survive in order to pass from one shore to the other. The chapter's working concept is anchorage. Arabic, moored to a fixed and constantly recited scripture, holds its central words fast; a word so held, *ribā* is his example, cannot cross languages without shedding the history that is the whole point of its meaning, and must instead cross as itself, visibly foreign, to be explained rather than replaced. Nor is the point confined to scripture. Even the name of a science can refuse to travel intact: what English calls economics, a neutral management of scarce things, Arabic calls *iqtiṣād*, a Qur'ānic word for right measure, and Japanese calls *keizai*, an old Confucian compound about ordering the world and saving the people, so that to express Islamic economics in three languages is to express three subtly

different things. Meanwhile, things and their labels cross lightly; the Arabic *qahwa* reached Japanese as *kōhī*, coffee, with most of its history left at the border. The deep settings of a language, the station of the self inside the sentence or the rule deciding who belongs among its speakers, hardly cross at all; they can only be inhabited, slowly, from within. Readers of Takeda will pause at that rule of belonging. The door through which the Shinqīṭīs entered the Arab east, the tongue itself, is here weighed from the inside. The chapter ends by pointing at its own successor.

That successor is the hinge of the volume. Khashan's second chapter asks who is speaking when a machine translates, and it refuses to answer quickly. First, it reconstructs, at length, what the crossing of a sacred text used to require: the Bible and the Qur'ān reached the Japanese language along slow roads of named translators, declared relay languages and committees whose labor is measured in years, where an error — the first missionaries preaching about the Christian God for roughly two years under the name of a cosmic Buddha — could at least be found, owned, and reversed. Against that record, the chapter sets the new instruments, in which the slowness has been abolished, the route hidden and the responsibility left to no one. It ends with proposals addressed to institutions, and with a personal resolution we leave for the reader; the three test words, *khamr*, *waqf* and the name of God, deserve to be met face-to-face in their own chapter rather than in this brief summary.

In the fifth chapter, Hasan Mahmud lifts the question from words to concepts. Sociology, he observes, has learned to take its evidence from everywhere while continuing to take its concepts from a few places, so that evidence and concepts move through the discipline in opposite directions. He accepts the postcolonial critique of this arrangement and declines to stop there. Drawing on his own research on Bengali Muslim

identity in Bangladesh, he offers some suggestions as to what a different path might look like, showing that binaries which the historiography had treated as settled — Bengali against Muslim, religion against language — kept failing to explain the evidence until the inherited categories themselves had to give way; his field, in his own words, became a “theoretical site,” a place where concepts are no longer merely applied but produced as required. His later pages on remittance as a form of belonging carry the same conversion forward across his research. The exchange with the fourth chapter is audible, and we did not plan it: both reach, from different disciplines, for the same warning of epistemicide, the potential destruction of a culture’s knowledge system, met by one inside the training data of machines and by the other in the long habits of an academic discipline.

Nobuyuki Matsui closes the book at its deepest point. Every chapter before his asks, in one register or another, who speaks; his asks what a speaking self is, and answers from the history of Japanese philosophy. The way in is grammatical. Japanese lets its sentences travel without an explicit subject: the opening line of Kawabata’s *Snow Country* names neither the train nor the passenger whom every reader nevertheless perceives. The novel’s English translator had to install a subject before the first verb could stand. That seemingly missing subject has been taken to indicate a supposedly missing subjectivity, but Matsui refutes this. Reading Nishida, the philosopher for whom subject and object arise within basho, the place that makes both possible, and after him Nakamura on embodiment and the *Noh* stage, he draws out a subjectivity that emerges within relations and consists in the capacity to re-form them; where the third chapter had observed the quiet self of the Japanese sentence from a non-native resident’s distance, this chapter shows what a century of philosophy made of it from within. Following the machine’s authorless fluency, the book ends with an account of the

one who speaks: a self formed in its relations and still able, on Matsui's reading of this tradition, to change them.

A word on method, because the reader will meet several. Some chapters rest on fieldwork and interviews; others are interpretive through and through, their arguments conducted among texts and the histories of scholarship. An interpretive chapter may still count things and cite figures without becoming an empirical study in the process; its claims stand or fall with readings rather than with samples. We made no attempt to iron this out. It has become usual, and rightly so, to say that a research field is more than a source of data, that it is a ground on which concepts take form. This book stretches the point past the field. Concepts are also born from texts, from languages themselves, and from archives, and a volume about the movement of knowledge would have been poorer had it admitted only one approach to method.

It remains to give thanks. The contributors bore a long schedule and our repeated queries with patience, and each of them shaped this volume beyond the pages that carry his name; the book is theirs. To the Asia-Japan Research Institute at Ritsumeikan University and to the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar we owe the frame within which the original meeting, and everything that has followed from it inside these covers, took place. To the former we owe more than the frame: it hosted that meeting, and it publishes this book under its AJI BOOKS imprint. Encounters of this kind do not arrange themselves. Professor Yasushi Kosugi, Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, has for years built and kept open the channels along which scholars from distant fields and distant places are brought together in the same room, and this volume is one result among many; we thank him for that work, and for his support at every stage of this one. Toshiyuki Takeda organized and hosted the symposium from which this book grew, and we thank him for it. Anthony Brewer

prepared the English of the manuscript with a care that improved every chapter, our own included. In the Editorial Office, Mr. Tahei Okamoto saw the book through production and made the many small adjustments on which a finished volume silently depends. The faults that remain are ours.

Ammar Khashan and Clovis Bergère

Kyoto, July 11, 2026

Contributors

1. Dr. Toshiyuki TAKEDA



Chapter 1. Arabic Language, Mobility, and Cross-border Networking of Shinqiti Intellectuals: Mauritania, the Arab Gulf, and Beyond in the Globalized World

Dr. Toshiyuki Takeda is an Assistant Professor of Arabic at the School of Foreign Studies, The University of Osaka. He earned his Ph.D. in Area Studies from the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University. His research focuses on the Arabic language and its intellectual and cultural traditions, with particular interests in traditional Arabic grammar, especially the grammatical tradition represented by Ibn Mālik's *Alfīya*, as well as Arabic prosody (*‘ilm al-‘arūd*) and the historical and contemporary development of Arabic across different regions of the Arab world.

Before joining The University of Osaka, he was Professor at the Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization and Deputy Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University. In that capacity, he organized and hosted the NUQ-RU Global Symposium “Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era” in July 2023, from which the present volume originated.

Takeda conducted fieldwork in Mauritania in 2012 and 2015 on traditional education in the *maḥḍara*, focusing particularly on the transmission of the traditional Arabic linguistic sciences as well as on the study of *‘ilm al-rasm*, the discipline concerned with Qur’ānic orthography and spelling conventions. His broader research examines

the transmission and transformation of Arabic linguistic knowledge, terminology, and scholarly traditions across the Arab world.

His major publications include *Developments in Contemporary Arabic and the Emergence of a New Arab Culture: From the Gulf States and Egypt to Mauritania* (in Japanese; Nakanishiya Shuppan, 2019), *New Express Plus Arabic: Audio Download Edition* (in Japanese; Hakusuisha, 2026), and the Arabic-language article “Juhūd Ruwwād al-Nahḍa wa al-Majāmi‘ al-Lughawiyya fī Iḥyā’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya wa Taḥdīthi-hā fī al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī al-Ḥadīth,” in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* (2012).

2. Dr. Clovis Bergère



Chapter 2. From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research: Reflections from Guinea

Clovis Bergère is the director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University Qatar. His research examines youth as a contested social and political category in Guinea, West Africa, with a focus on digital media and urban

life. In addition, he has also written on street corners as nodes of youth sociability and politics in Guinea. Prior to joining Northwestern University in Qatar, he worked at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also completed a postdoctoral fellowship. He holds a Ph.D. in Childhood Studies from Rutgers University-Camden (2017) and has taught at Rutgers University in Camden, the University of the Arts, and the University of Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in the *Public Culture*, *International Journal of Communication*, *African Studies Review*, the *Journal of Childhood Studies*, and *American Anthropologist*, as well as several edited volumes, including *Southern Digitalities: Reimagining Digital Studies from the Global South* (2026, University of Illinois Press), which he co-edited with Marwan Kraidy and Marina Krikorian. Prior to returning to academia in 2011, he worked as a project manager in Children's Services in London, where he oversaw the building of over thirty playgrounds and youth centers, focused on natural play and collaborative design.

3. Dr. Ammar Khashan



Chapter 3. Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic, Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

Chapter 4. Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation? Language, AI, and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

Dr. Ammar Khashan is an Associate Professor at the Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization. He graduated from the Faculty of Sharia at Damascus University in 2004 and completed his master's program in Hadith studies there in 2011, with a thesis on the *Musnad* of Abū Ḥanīfa in the recension of al-Ḥārithī. He received his Ph.D. in Area Studies from the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University, in 2017.

His recent research reads the social and economic institutions of Islam, above all *zakāt* and *waqf*, together with *takāful* in its general sense: the principle of mutual responsibility under which these institutions stand. Drawing on the classical sources of Islamic law, he follows mutual aid and mutual responsibility in Islamic society from early Islamic history to their contemporary revivals in Muslim societies, with fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia. Writing in Arabic, Japanese, and English, he has turned increasingly to what happens to Islamic legal and economic concepts when they cross languages and cultures. With Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), he is compiling a dictionary of Islamic economic terminology in English, Japanese, and Indonesian that records how each language and culture has received, used, and at times coined these terms.

His books include *Portraying the Islamic Economy in its*

Primordial Grand Design: From its Birth in the Prophetic Period through its Legal Formulation to the Contemporary Innovations (in Japanese; Nakanishiya Shuppan, 2022) and *Islamic Social Finance and the Architecture of Mutual Responsibility: Zakat and Waqf in the Digital Governance of Islamic Welfare* (Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University, 2026). He is the editor of *The Development of Islamic Economics for Social Welfare: Reassessing Waqf, Zakāt, and Takāful in Asia* (Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University, 2024).

4. Dr. Hasan Mahmud



Chapter 5. Theorizing from the Global South: From Critique to Reconstruction in Postcolonial Social Theory

Dr. Hasan Mahmud is Associate Professor in Residence of Sociology in the Liberal Arts Program at Northwestern University in Qatar. He received his PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles, and his MA in Global Studies from Sophia University, Japan, where he studied as a Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholar. His research is based on nearly two decades of ethnographic work in Bangladesh, Japan, Qatar, and the United States.

His work focuses on migration, belonging, and social theory, with particular interests in temporary migration, South–South migration, and ethnographic research. Much of his scholarship examines how migrants negotiate home, family, religion, and social mobility across different migration regimes. In recent years, he has become increasingly interested in the relationship between empirical research and theory, exploring how sociological concepts can emerge from the historical experiences of societies that have traditionally been treated primarily as sites of fieldwork.

Mahmud is the author of *Remittance as Belonging: Global Migration, Transnationalism, and the Quest for Home* (Rutgers University Press, 2024), which develops a sociological understanding of remittances as practices of belonging rather than simply economic transfers. He is also the author of *Bangali Musoloman Proshno* (*The Bengali Muslim Question*, 2022) and co-editor, with Min Zhou, of *Beyond Economic Migration: Social, Historical, and Political Factors*

in US Immigration (New York University Press, 2023). His research has appeared in journals including *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Current Sociology*, *International Migration*, *Migration and Development*, and *Sociological Perspectives*. Across his work, he combines long-term ethnographic research with an interest in developing concepts that speak to broader debates in migration studies and contemporary social theory.

5. Dr. Nobuyuki Matsui



Chapter 6. From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity: Relationality in Japanese Thought from Nishida Kitarō to Nakamura Yūjirō

MATSUI Nobuyuki is an associate professor at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts, Japan. He earned a BA in Asia Pacific Studies from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, and an MA and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Graduate School of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University. His expertise lies in International Relations, Global Ethics, postwar Japanese Philosophy, and Western Philosophy in English, French, and German, focusing on several themes such as embodiment, place, nothingness, technology, and capitalism. His main research concern is bridging Japanese and Western philosophies to understand global and social transformations shaped by crises in technology, economic systems, and the environment. He is the editor of *Globally Shared Common Sense from the Philosophy of Imagination: Bridging Eastern and Western Perspectives* (AJI Books, 2022) and has published articles including "'Common Sense' and Encounters after the 'Capital-Nation-State' in the Digital Age: Nakamura Yūjirō vs. Karatani Kōjin in their Philosophies of Imagination," *Journal of the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University*, Vol. 3, pp.17–32, 2021.

Chapter 1

Arabic Language, Mobility, and Cross-border Networking of Shinqiti Intellectuals: Mauritania, the Arab Gulf, and Beyond in the Globalized World

Toshiyuki TAKEDA

1. Introduction

Mauritania occupies a distinctive position at the western edge of the Arabic-speaking world. Geographically, it lies at the intersection of North and West Africa; historically, it has been connected to trans-Saharan routes linking the Maghreb, the Atlantic Sahara, and the Sahel; and linguistically, Arabic has long been central to religious learning, literary culture, and public life. Article 6 of the Mauritanian Constitution recognizes Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof as national languages and Arabic as the official language. Mauritania has also been a member of the Arab League since 1973. Yet in scholarship on the modern Arab world, the country has often remained peripheral to narratives centered on Egypt, the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.

This apparent marginality is misleading. Before the colonial period, the region was widely known as Bilād Shinqīt, the land of Shinqīt, after the historic Saharan town of Shinqīt. The *nisba* Shinqītī, whose plural is Shanāqīṭa, continues to identify scholars and families linked to Mauritania and has long been associated in the Arab East with a particular scholarly reputation: mastery of Arabic, poetry, Qurʾānic

learning, Islamic jurisprudence, and, above all, an exceptional culture of memorization. From the nineteenth century onward, scholars from Bilād Shinqīt travelled eastward for pilgrimage, study, teaching, publication, and employment. Their movement linked Mauritania to Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Kuwait, al-Zubayr, and other centers of Arabic and Islamic learning (al-Idrīsī 2009; Lydon 2004; Wuld al-Sālim 2012).

This chapter examines that mobility from two connected perspectives. The first is the local educational tradition that produced such scholars, especially the *maḥḍara*, the traditional Mauritanian institution of Arabic and Islamic learning. The second is the movement of Shinqītī intellectuals beyond Mauritania and the ways in which their knowledge acquired authority in Egypt and the Gulf. The argument is that mobility was not simply a later consequence of scholarly achievement. It was built into the educational culture itself: knowledge was memorized, carried, recited, copied onto portable wooden boards, transmitted from teacher to student, and ultimately transported across regions by people whose scholarly authority travelled with them.

The discussion draws on my fieldwork in Mauritania in 2012 and 2015, as well as on earlier research on Mauritanian Arabic culture and Shinqītī intellectual networks (Takeda 2014; 2019). The purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive history of Mauritania or of the *maḥḍara*. Rather, it is to show how a local tradition of Arabic linguistic and Islamic learning became a resource for cross-border knowledge production in the modern Arab world.

2. Arabic and Linguistic Culture in Mauritania

Mauritania is frequently described as the “country of a million poets” (*balad al-milyūn shā‘ir*). The expression acquired particularly wide currency in the Arab world after the Kuwaiti magazine *al-‘Arabī*

devoted a major illustrated feature to Nouakchott in its April 1967 issue (no. 101). The article, entitled “Nuwākshūt: Aḥdath ‘Āṣima fī Aqṣā Mintaqa min Waṭani-nā al-‘Arabī” (“Nouakchott: The Newest Capital in the Farthest Region of Our Arab Homeland”), introduced Mauritania through the memorable image of “a million poets” at a time when the country’s population was approximately one million (Norris 1968; Takeda 2014; Zabbāl 1967: 70). The expression is rhetorical, but it captures an important feature of Mauritanian linguistic culture: poetry, memorization, and command of Arabic have long carried considerable social prestige. This reputation is closely connected with the country’s history of traditional learning and with the scholarly identity associated with Bilād Shinqīt.

In everyday life, many Mauritians speak Ḥassānīya, the Arabic variety historically associated with the Banū Ḥassān and now widespread across Mauritania and adjacent Saharan regions. Alongside it, *fuṣṣḥā*—classical and modern standard Arabic—occupies the domains of formal education, religious learning, writing, public communication, and much of the media. As elsewhere in the Arab world, the relationship between spoken and standard varieties cannot be reduced to a simple opposition. In Mauritania, however, fieldwork suggests an especially positive social valuation of *fuṣṣḥā* and of the ability to use it confidently. In educational and religious settings, speaking standard Arabic is not treated as artificial or socially embarrassing; it is commonly understood as a sign of learning and cultivated competence (Taine-Cheikh 2007; Takeda 2014).

This linguistic attitude is important for understanding the *maḥḍara*. The traditional curriculum does not teach Arabic simply as a means of communication. Arabic is also an object of disciplined study. Grammar (*naḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), rhetoric (*balāgha*), lexicography, and the close reading and memorization of classical Arabic poetry form

important parts of the traditional Arabic linguistic sciences (*‘ulūm al-‘arabīya*). Canonical pre-Islamic poetry, including the *Mu‘allaqāt*, is valued not only as literature but also as a source of authoritative linguistic attestations (*shawāhid*; sg. *shāhid*) for grammar and lexical usage. Qur’ānic orthography (*rasm*) and the system of vocalization and recitational signs known as *ḍabṭ*, discussed separately below, belong more specifically to the Qur’ānic sciences, although they share the same concern with linguistic and graphic precision.

3. *Maḥḍara* Education and the Traditional Arabic Linguistic Sciences

The *maḥḍara* is a traditional private institution of learning associated especially with Mauritania and the wider scholarly tradition of Bilād Shinqīt. The term is generally explained as a place noun derived from the root ḥ-ḍ-r, from *ḥaḍara*, “to be present” or “to attend.” In Ḥassānīya, /ḍ/ may be realized as /z/, and the form *maḥḥara* is therefore also widely used. An alternative etymology relates *maḥḥara* to the root ḥ-ẓ-r, “to prohibit” or “to restrict,” interpreting the institution as a protected or restricted space devoted to religious learning (Ibn Aḥmad 1996: 65). Mauritanian discussions of the term have long noted both explanations.

The derivation from ḥ-ḍ-r also has support in older Arabic usage. Mauritanian scholars have cited a verse by Labīd ibn Rabī‘a as a *shāhid* for this derivation. In the verse, the plural *maḥāḍir* refers to encampments or gathering sites around water sources. The same verse is also cited by classical lexicographers, including Ibn Manẓūr (1986, s.v. ḥ-ḍ-r):

فَالْوَادِيَانِ فَكُلُّ مَغْنَى مِنْهُنَّ وَعَلَى الْمِيَاهِ مَحَاضِرٌ وَخِيَامٌ

fa‘l-wāḍiyāni fa-kullu maghnan minhumū / wa ‘ala‘l-miyāhi
maḥāḍirun wa khiyāmū

“Then the two valleys and every dwelling-place of theirs; at the watering places were encampments and tents.”

The precise historical derivation of the institutional name need not be reduced to a single explanation. Both forms, however, illuminate features that became characteristic of the Mauritanian *maḥḍara*: gathering around a teacher, encampment and mobility, and a socially protected space devoted to learning.

Historically, the institution was closely adapted to a pastoral and mobile way of life. A learned teacher—usually referred to locally as *al-shaykh*, *al-murābiṭ*, or in some contexts *al-ṭālib*—taught in and around his household or tent. When the household moved seasonally with family and livestock, students who wished to continue studying could move with the teacher. In this sense, the *maḥḍara* was literally portable.

Contemporary Mauritania is far more settled, and many *maḥḍara* schools now operate in permanent locations. Nevertheless, the older model remains important for the institution’s self-understanding. The *maḥḍara* differs from a modern school not only in architecture but also in organization. Students may enter at different levels, study different texts, and progress at an individual pace under the supervision of a teacher. Earlier fieldwork-based estimates placed the number of *maḥḍara* schools in Mauritania at around eight thousand; the figure should be understood as an approximate estimate rather than a current census (Takeda 2014; 2019).

Memorization lies at the heart of *maḥḍara* pedagogy, and versified pedagogical texts are particularly valued because meter and rhyme facilitate memorization, recitation, and oral transmission. A short poem widely attributed to al-Shāfi‘ī and frequently cited in Mauritanian discussions of learning expresses this ideal succinctly:

عِلْمِي مَعِي حَيْثُمَا يَتَّبَعْنِي صَدْرِي وَعَاءٌ لَهُ لَا جَوْفَ صُنْدُوقِ
 إِنْ كُنْتُ فِي الْبَيْتِ كَانَ الْعِلْمُ فِيهِ مَعِي أَوْ كُنْتُ فِي السُّوقِ كَانَ الْعِلْمُ فِي السُّوقِ

‘ilmī ma‘ī ḥaythumā yammamtu yatba‘unī / ṣadrī wi‘ā’un la-hū lā jawfu
 ṣundūqī

in kuntu fi l-bayti kāna l-‘ilmu fī-hi ma‘ī / aw kuntu fi ssūqi
 kāna l-‘ilmu fī ssūqi

“My knowledge is with me wherever I go; it follows me. My breast is its vessel, not the inside of a box. If I am at home, knowledge is there with me; if I am in the marketplace, knowledge is there in the marketplace.”

The point is not a rejection of writing. Rather, written texts and oral mastery reinforce one another. A book that has been fully internalized can travel without luggage. This helps explain the prominence of concise *matn* texts and, especially, versified teaching texts (*naẓm*) throughout the *maḥḍara* curriculum.

Students normally begin with the Qur’ān and subsequently proceed to texts in the Arabic linguistic sciences and the Islamic sciences. In grammar, a common progression leads from *al-Ājurrūmīya* to Ibn Mālik’s *al-Khulāṣa*, better known as the *Alfīya*, and then to more advanced Mauritanian works of commentary and supplementation. Among the most important is Ibn Būnā’s *al-Iḥmirār*. Ibn Būnā (d. 1805/6) composed approximately 1,200 additional verses to supplement points omitted or treated only briefly in the *Alfīya*, drawing particularly on Ibn Mālik’s other grammatical works. The title *al-Iḥmirār*, literally “reddening,” evokes the scholarly practice of distinguishing supplementary material through red ink. The exceptional prestige of the *Alfīya* in Mauritanian grammatical culture is expressed in the well-known phrase *naḥnu alfīyūn*—“we are people of the *Alfīya*” (al-Ya‘qūbī 2005; Takeda 2019).

The curriculum is, of course, not limited to grammar. Morphology is represented, for example, by Ibn Mālik's *Lāmīya al-Af'āl* and by Mauritanian commentarial traditions such as Wuld Zayn's *al-Ṭurra*, later revised and expanded by Muḥammad Sālim Wuld 'Addūd and also known as *al-Khiyāṭa*. Rhetoric (*balāgha*) and classical poetry are likewise important components of advanced linguistic training. The memorization and close reading of pre-Islamic poetry, including the *Mu'allaqāt*, provide students not only with a literary canon but also with a reservoir of authoritative *shawāhid* against which grammatical and lexical usage can be tested (Takeda 2019).

Lexicography likewise becomes part of memorized learning. The preface and selected sections of al-Fīrūzābādī's *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* have traditionally been studied as texts in their own right, and commentaries on the dictionary circulated in the *maḥḍara*. Advanced scholars were celebrated not merely for being able to consult a dictionary, but for carrying substantial lexical knowledge in memory (Takeda 2019).

Great importance is also attached to precise vocalization. Students are trained to distinguish words that share the same consonantal spelling but differ in meaning according to their short vowels. One widely memorized mnemonic text is known in Mauritania simply as *Muthallath Quṭrub*. The lexical material ultimately goes back to Quṭrub's prose *Muthallath*, but the version actually used in *maḥḍara* education is a versification by 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maghribī al-Miknāsī, also known bibliographically as *al-Mūrith li-Mushkil al-Muthallath*. Small printed editions circulating in Mauritania nevertheless bear the familiar title *Muthallath Quṭrub*. The text organizes lexical "triplets" whose consonantal skeleton is identical while meaning changes with the short vowels, turning fine distinctions of vocalization and lexical meaning into compact verse that can readily be memorized and orally transmitted (al-Miknāsī n.d.; Takeda 2019).

These practices are important because they show that the *maḥḍara* was not simply a place where inherited books were repeated. It was also a site of local scholarly production. Mauritanian scholars composed supplements, versifications, marginal commentaries, mnemonic poems, and teaching manuals that adapted widely shared Arabic texts to local pedagogical needs. The tradition therefore combined preservation with continuous reworking: canonical texts travelled into Bilād Shinqīt, were reorganized and commented upon there, and could later travel outward again through the scholars trained in this system.

The most visible material object of *maḥḍara* education is the wooden writing board, the *lawḥ*. In Qurʾānic learning, a student works with relatively small portions of text. At an early stage the teacher may write the passage on the board; at a later stage the student writes it independently, recites it repeatedly, and, after the passage has been mastered, washes the board for reuse. Oral transmission and writing thus proceed together. The board is not merely a temporary substitute for paper. In many households it is a valued object associated with family learning and may be preserved across generations.

The close association between learning and mobility is also expressed in a saying attributed to the Mauritanian scholar and religious leader Nāṣir al-Dīn (al-Idrīsī 2009: 76):

مَنْ رَكَبَ مِنْكُمْ فَرَسَهُ فَلْيَجْعَلْ لَوْحَهُ بَيْنَهُ وَبَيْنَ سَرْجِهِ، فَإِنَّ الْجَهْلَ هُوَ أَقْبَحُ مَا يَأْتِي بِهِ الْمَرْءُ
الْآخِرَةَ.

man rakiba min-kum farasa-hu fa ʿl-yajʿal lawḥa-hu bayna-hu wa bayna sarji-hi, fa-inna ʿl-jahla huwa aqbaḥu ma yaʿtī bi-hi ʿl-marʿu ʿl-ākhirā.

“Whoever among you mounts his horse should place his writing board between himself and his saddle, for ignorance is the ugliest thing a person can bring to the Hereafter.”

The image of carrying the *lawḥ* even on horseback vividly captures the portability of learning that characterized the *maḥḍara* tradition.

This practice is closely connected with the Qur’ānic sciences of *rasm* and *ḍabṭ*. Here *rasm* refers to the conventional orthographic forms of the Qur’ānic text, especially the spelling conventions associated with the ‘Uthmānic *muṣḥaf*, while *ḍabṭ* concerns the diacritical, vocalic, and other graphic signs used to guide correct recitation. Although these disciplines require a high degree of linguistic precision, they belong more specifically to the traditional Qur’ānic sciences than to grammar or morphology. In Mauritanian traditional education, practical familiarity with them has had an unusually prominent pedagogical place. Students learn not only to recite the Qur’ān from memory but also to reproduce its written form with close attention to orthography and recitational notation. In some *maḥḍara* traditions, complete Qur’ānic mastery includes the ability to move accurately between memory, voice, and writing.

Mauritanian scholars developed a substantial mnemonic literature for this field. Among the standard texts is *al-Īdāḥ al-Sāṭi* ‘by al-Ṭālib ‘Abd Allāh al-Jakanī, commonly known in Mauritania as *Rasm al-Ṭālib* ‘Abd Allāh. Another major mnemonic poem is *Kashf al-‘Amā*, on Qur’ānic orthography (*rasm al-muṣḥaf*), by Muḥammad al-‘Āqib al-Jakanī (Ibn Māyābā), together with the author’s extensive commentary *Rashf al-Lamā* ‘*alā Kashf al-‘Amā* (al-Jakanī 2004; Ibn Māyābā 2006). These works are standard examples of the Shinqīṭī tradition of rendering technically demanding knowledge of Qur’ānic orthography and notation into concise, memorisable verse and then elaborating it through commentary (Takeda 2019).

The practical importance of such works is visible in the everyday exercise of writing Qur’ānic passages on the *lawḥ*. Knowledge is first heard, then written, memorized, checked, erased, and written again. The

cycle makes the physical act of writing part of the discipline of memory.



Figure 1. Writing Qur'ānic text on a *lawḥ* in a Mauritanian *maḥḍara*.
Source: Author's photograph, 12 March 2012.

4. Knowledge on the Move: Shinqīṭī Scholars in Egypt and the Gulf

The scholarly reputation cultivated in the *maḥḍara* did not remain confined to Mauritania. Travel for pilgrimage and the pursuit of knowledge created routes linking Bilād Shinqīṭ with the Maghreb, Egypt, the Hijaz, Iraq, and the Gulf. For Shinqīṭī scholars, the journey eastward could simultaneously be a *riḥla* for learning, a pilgrimage to Mecca, an opportunity to meet other scholars, and the beginning of a teaching or publishing career abroad. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *nisba* al-Shinqīṭī had become recognizable in eastern Arab intellectual circles as a marker of a particular kind of learned authority (Wuld al-Sālim 2012; Takeda 2014).

(1) Ibn al-Talāmīd and the Nahḍa-era scholarly world

One prominent example is Muḥammad Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-Turkuzī

al-Shinqīṭī, commonly known as Ibn al-Talāmīd (1829–1904). His career took him through Mecca and other centers before he settled in Egypt, where he became known for his command of Arabic philology, poetry, and ḥadīth. His presence in al-Azhar appears in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s autobiographical *al-Ayyām*, which recalls the formidable learning and memory of the “Shaykh al-Shinqīṭī” and the impression he made on advanced students (Ḥusayn 1960, vol. 2: 154; Takeda 2014). This is an important point in itself: a scholar trained in the learned tradition of Bilād Shinqīṭ had become part of the intellectual world through which one of modern Egypt’s most influential writers encountered classical Arabic learning.

Ibn al-Talāmīd’s work also extended beyond teaching. He participated in the late nineteenth-century revival of Arabic textual scholarship in Cairo, was involved in discussions of the Arabization of foreign vocabulary, and collaborated with figures associated with Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s circle. He contributed to the editing of classical works, including the large lexicographical compilation *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* of Ibn Sīda, and took part in the wider culture of print, textual verification, and linguistic debate that characterized the Nahḍa. His reputation illustrates how Shinqīṭī expertise entered a modernizing intellectual environment not as a relic of an isolated tradition, but as a resource for philology, education, and the revival of Arabic heritage (Takeda 2014; 2019).

(2) From Kuwait and al-Zubayr to Najd

The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula formed another important field of Shinqīṭī mobility. Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī al-Ḥasanī (1876–1932), often known as Fāl al-Khayr, travelled through Egypt, Mecca, India, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, al-Zubayr in southern Iraq, and Najd.

His career shows that the movement of Mauritanian scholars cannot be understood simply as migration from one country to another. It was a network of repeated journeys, personal introductions, teaching appointments, patronage, and institutional initiatives.

In Kuwait, Fāl al-Khayr taught ḥadīth in the charitable association established in the early twentieth century. In al-Zubayr he helped establish the al-Najāt Association and a school that later became an important educational institution in the region. He also spent substantial periods in ‘Unayza in Najd, where he taught a generation of students that included ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa‘dī, later a prominent Qur’ānic commentator (al-Dulayshī 1981: 105, 146, 177; al-Idrīsī 2009: 315–320). These activities demonstrate a pattern that would become increasingly important in the twentieth century: Shinqīṭī scholars were valued not only as individual teachers but also as carriers of educational methods and scholarly curricula at a moment when new schools and institutions were being built across the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula.

(3) Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī in Saudi Arabia

A later and particularly influential case is Muḥammad al-Amīn ibn Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Jakanī al-Shinqīṭī (1907–1974), author of the major Qur’ānic commentary *Aḍwā’ al-Bayān fī Ḍdāḥ al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān*. He travelled to the Hijaz for pilgrimage in the late 1940s and subsequently remained in Saudi Arabia, teaching in Medina and Riyadh. His expertise in Qur’ānic exegesis, legal theory, Arabic, and classical poetry earned him a prominent position in Saudi scholarly life. When the Islamic University of Medina opened in 1961, he became one of its early professors, and he also served on the founding council of the Muslim World League (al-Ṭawayn 1998; Takeda 2019).

His career represents a different stage of the same process visible in

Egypt half a century earlier. In Cairo, Shinqītī philological knowledge entered the world of print, textual editing, and Nahḍa-era linguistic reform. In Saudi Arabia, Mauritanian scholarly capital entered rapidly expanding institutions of Islamic higher education. The institutional setting had changed, but the qualities for which Shinqītī scholars were valued—memorization, textual command, Arabic eloquence, and broad training across the transmitted sciences—remained strikingly similar.

This reputation also helps explain why the name Shinqītī acquired considerable symbolic value in the Gulf. Mauritanian scholars were never a single intellectual school, and their political and theological positions varied. Yet the *nisba* often carried what might be called scholarly reputational capital: it signaled an association with a demanding tradition of Arabic and Islamic learning. In modern conditions, that reputation facilitated appointments, patronage, teaching, publication, and the creation of new scholarly networks extending well beyond Mauritania.

5. Conclusion

The case of Mauritania complicates a simple geography of center and periphery in the modern Arab world. From the perspective of Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, or the Gulf capitals, Bilād Shinqīt may appear to lie at the far western edge of Arabic intellectual life. Yet the movement of Shinqītī scholars reveals a different map. Knowledge preserved and elaborated in Mauritanian *maḥḍara* schools travelled eastward through pilgrimage, teaching, textual scholarship, and personal networks. In Egypt it contributed to the culture of philology and classical revival; in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia it became part of the development of modern educational and religious institutions.

The *maḥḍara* is central to this history because it joined mobility to

a distinctive technology of learning. The portable *lawḥ*, the recited and memorized *matn*, the extensive use of versified pedagogical texts, and the study of Qur'ānic *rasm* and *ḍabt* allowed knowledge to be carried in both material and embodied forms. The teacher could move; the student could move; the board could be washed and reused; the memorized text remained. This did not make Mauritanian learning static or untouched by modernity. On the contrary, the tradition continually produced commentaries, versifications, and adaptations, and its graduates entered new institutions far from the Sahara.

Seen from this perspective, Mauritania should not be treated merely as a marginal West African or Maghribi case appended to the history of Arabic. It is better understood as one of the nodes through which Arabic linguistic and Islamic knowledge has been produced, conserved, and redistributed. The history of the Shinqīṭī scholars therefore offers a concrete answer to the larger question of this volume: knowledge moves because people, texts, memories, and institutions move together, and the routes of that movement are often longer and less centered than conventional maps of intellectual history suggest.

References

- al-Dulayshī, 'Abd al-Laṭīf. 1981. *Min A' lām al-Fikr al-Islāmī fī al-Baṣra: al-Shaykh Muḥammad Amīn al-Shinqīṭī*. Bayrūt: Mu'assasa al-Maṭbū'āt al-'Arabīya.
- Ḥusayn, Tāhā. 1960. *al-Ayyām*. 3 vols. al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ma'ārif.
- Ibn Aḥmad, Muḥammad Maḥfūz. 1996. *Makāna Uṣūl al-Fiqh fī al-Thaqāfa al-Maḥzarīya al-Mūrītānīya*. Nuwākshūt: al-Maktab al-'Arabī li al-Jāmi'āt al-Thaqāfīya.
- Ibn Manẓūr, Muḥammad ibn Mukarram. 1986. *Lisān al-'Arab*. 18 vols. Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Ibn Māyābā, Muḥammad al-'Āqib. 2006. *Rashf al-Lamā 'alā Kashf*

- al-‘Amā*. Ed. by Muḥammad ibn Sīdī Muḥammad Mawlāy. al-Kuwayt: Dār al-Īlāf al-Dawlīya.
- al-Idrīsī, Abū ‘Alī Buḥayyid ibn al-Shaykh Yarbān al-Qalqamī. 2009. *A ‘lām al-Shanāqīṭa fī al-Ḥijāz wa al-Mashriq: Juhūd-hum al-‘Ilmīya wa Qaḍāyā-hum al-‘Āmma min al-Qarn al-Khāmis ilā al-Qarn al-Khāmis ‘Ashar al-Hijrīyayn*. al-Riyāḍ: Dār al-Nashr al-Dawlī li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘.
- al-Jakanī, al-Ṭālib ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad. 2004. *al-Īdāḥ al-Sāṭi‘ ‘alā al-Muḥṭawā al-Jāmi‘ Rasm al-Ṣaḥāba wa-Ḍabṭ al-Tābi‘*. Ed. by al-Shaykh ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Shaykh Aḥmad. Ṭab‘a Khāṣṣa li-l-Mu‘allif.
- Lydon, Ghislaine. 2004. Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilād Shinqīṭ. In Scott Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 39–71.
- al-Miknāsī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maghribī. n.d. *Muthallath Quṭrub [al-Mūrith li-Mushkil al-Muthallath]*. Nuwākshūṭ: Maktaba al-Wallāṭi.
- Norris, H. T. 1968. *Shinqīṭi Folk Literature and Song*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Taine-Cheikh, Catherine. 2007. Ḥassāniyya Arabic. In Kees Versteegh et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 240–250.
- Takeda, Toshiyuki. 2014. Gendai Mōritania ni okeru Arabu, Isurāmu Bunka no Shosō [Perspectives on the Arab-Islamic Culture in Mauritania]. *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, 7, 276–297. (in Japanese)
- . 2019. *Gendai Arabia-go no Hatten to Arabu Bunka no Shinjidai: Wangan Shokoku, Ejiputo kara Mōritania made [Developments in Contemporary Arabic and the Emergence of a*

- New Arab Culture: From the Gulf States and Egypt to Mauritania*]. Kyoto: Nakanishiya Shuppan. (in Japanese)
- al-Ṭawayyān, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Ṣāliḥ. 1998. *Juhūd al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī fī Taqrīr ‘Aqīda al-Salaf*. 2 vols. al-Riyād: Maktaba al-‘Ubaykān.
- Wuld al-Sālim, Ḥamāh Allāh. 2012. *Ḥujjāj wa-Muhājirūn: ‘Ulamā’ Bilād Shinqīṭ (Mūrūtāniyā) fī al-Bilād al-‘Arabīya wa-Turkiyā min al-Qarn al-Tāsi’ ilā al-Qarn al-Rābi’ ‘Aṣḥar al-Hijrī*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīya.
- al-Ya‘qūbī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Māmī. 2005. *Taqrīb Ṭurra Ibn Būnā ‘alā Alfīya Ibn Mālīk fī al-Naḥw*. Nuwākshūt: Jā’iza Shinqīṭ li-l-Ādāb.
- Zabbāl, Salīm. 1967. Nuwākshūt: Aḥdath ‘Āṣima fī Aqṣā Minṭaqa min Waṭani-nā al-‘Arabī. *al-‘Arabī*, 101, 68–90.

Chapter 2

From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research: Reflections from Guinea

Clovis Bergère

1. Introduction

Yáng Shuáng-zǐ¹'s award-winning² *Taiwan Travelogue* is a historical fiction novel presenting itself as the latest translation of a supposedly long-lost but rediscovered travel memoir by the (fictional) Japanese novelist Aoyama Chizuko. Written and first published in Mandarin in 2020, later translated in Japanese (2023) and English (2024), *Taiwan Travelogue* is set in Taiwan in 1938 during Japanese occupation. It follows Aoyama-sensei as she travels — or perhaps more accurately eats her way³ — through Taiwan over the course of a year, sent to the island by the colonial Japanese government on a lecture tour to present

1 Yáng Shuáng-zǐ (杨双子 in simplified Chinese; 楊双子 in traditional Chinese; Yáng Shuāngzǐ in pinyin) which means “twins” is the shared pen name for twin Taiwanese sisters and authors Yang Jo-tzu and Yang Jo-hui who created the pen name to collaborate on historical fiction combining Jo-tzu’s interest in literature and Jo-hui’s interest in history and translation. When Jo-hui passed away to cancer in 2019, Jo-tzu continued writing under the pen name Yáng Shuáng-zǐ in her sister’s memory.

2 As of August 2026, the novel has won the Golden Tripod Award (2020); Best Translation Award [for the Japanese translation] (2024); the National Book Award for Translated Literature [for the English translation] (2024), and was short-listed for the International Booker Prize (2026).

3 Food is a major theme in the book, with each chapter named after a dish (ex: Kue-Tsi/ Roasted Seeds; Muâ-Inn-Thng/ Jute Soup; Tang-Kue-Tê/ Winter Melon Tea; etc....).

her acclaimed book, adapted into a film, *A Record of Youth*. The book centers on Aoyama's relationship with Ms. Wáng Chiēn-hò (Ōng Tshian-hóh in Taiwanese, Ō Chizuru in Japanese), her interpreter, whom she nicknames Chi-chan. A deeply layered novel — a “meta historical fiction” as described by Lin King, the translator for the English version⁴ — *Taiwan Travelogue*, under the guise of a light-hearted memoirized travelogue, asks deep questions about the (im)possibilities of love and friendship across colonial lines, while centering both food and translation as meta-narratives to carry forward the charmingly ambivalent and restrained love story at the heart of the novel. In order to disguise itself as a work of translation rather than fiction, *Taiwan Travelogue* is book-ended by an “introduction” by a fictional academic Hiyoshi Sagako who claims to be in possession of the original Japanese copy of the 1977 translation of *Taiwan Travelogue* as well as four afterwords: one claiming to be from Aoyama's (fictional) daughter and three from (equally fictional) translators and editors to the supposed 1977, 1990, and 2020 editions of the book, this latest one penned by Yáng Shuáng-zǐ herself, masquerading as the translator rather than the actual author of the novel. Further blurring the line between reality and fiction, the English edition also includes a note by Lin King, the novel's real-life translator. In it, she reflects on the fact that for the (real) translation from Mandarin into English, she had to rely on Miura Yūko's earlier (also real) Japanese translation of the novel, noting somewhat tongue-in-cheek that:

Surely Aoyama and Chi-chan would be tickled by this: a Taiwanese translator, while bringing the book to the ultimate colonial language of English, has struggled to determine how the Japanese colonial

4 See: <https://www.litromagazine.com/art-technology/yang-shuang-zi-lin-king-taiwan-travelogue-interview/>

government would have pronounced Taiwanese terms and therefore consulted the Japanese translation of a Taiwanese novel that claims to be a Taiwanese translation of a Japanese novel. *Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!* (Yáng 2024, 293)

For many of us working in the Global South, where multilingualism tends to be the norm,⁵ research often feels akin to what King describes above. In my research on youth and media in Guinea, West Africa, for instance, I find myself conducting fieldwork and interviews primarily in French, the colonial language, while navigating everyday spaces where Pular is dominant, interacting in that language when I am in Labé. Yet, Guinea is a multilingual context and regardless of whether one is speaking primarily in French or Pular, words in Susu or Maninka are commonly used. Maninka is, in fact, one of the most widely spoken languages in Guinea, a country with thirty-two official languages including French and thirty-one “national languages,” such as Pular, Maninka, Susu, Guerzé, Toma, Kissi, amongst many others. Consequently, in my work, I often find myself asking my Pular-speaking friends for the meanings of Maninka or Susu words, languages I do not speak. What is more, while French was introduced to Guinea under France’s colonial occupation, it has since been appropriated by local populations, who changed it, often as a way to “write against” or decenter the colonial and thus historically “hypercentral language to engage it within its African becoming” (Diagne 2022, 81). As a result, I often find myself translating Guinean French into French, or more often, English, the language in which I tend to write, another hypercentral

5 On this point, Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s work on translation, including the introduction of *De Langue à langue: L’hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022) is illuminating, including his distinction between (colonial) diglossia, which tends towards monolingualism and true multilingualism that creates relations of equality between languages, both oral and written.

colonial language. As a French scholar whose undergraduate and graduate studies were in the United Kingdom and the United States, I draw largely – but not exclusively – on Anglophone scholarship, which I enjoy putting into conversation with scholarship in French, another layer to this moving across languages typical of much Global South scholarship. *Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!*

In this brief note on translating as a part of research, I draw on my recent encounter with Yáng Shuáng-zǐ's *Taiwan Travelogue* as well as the writings of Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Édouard Glissant to reflect on my experience conducting fieldwork over the past thirty years in Guinea, and more specifically in Labé⁶ and Conakry,⁷ two very different linguistic contexts. This chapter is organized around three points: 1) translating requires moving across contexts shaped by various power asymmetries, including colonial violence. As such, it is difficult and cannot be approached naïvely or as a purely technical exercise; 2) at the heart of translation is an encounter that should be shaped by hospitality rather than domination. This has practical implications for how we might approach the task from a multilingualist rather than diglossic perspective; 3) working across languages forces us to reconsider the form of our writing in addition to its content. This could involve embracing the richness of what Édouard Glissant called “lieux-communs” [“commonplaces” in English]: footnotes, afterwords, notes, forewords, and other “minor” writing genres that often become recentered in the work of translating. Ultimately, I argue with Diagne,

6 Labé is Guinea's fourth largest city in terms of population with 2025 estimates at around 250,000. The cultural and administrative capital of the Fouta Djallon region, it is the second largest city in the country after the capital Conakry in terms of economic importance.

7 Conakry is the capital and largest city of Guinea, with a population of around 3,407,000 according to the 2025 census. A port city, it serves as the economic, financial and cultural centre of Guinea.

Glissant, and Yáng that translating is a necessarily uncomfortable and chaotic, yet at times joyous affair.

2. Moving Across Languages

From an etymological perspective, the English verb *to translate* combines the Latin preposition *trans-* meaning “across, beyond, or through” and the word *lātus*, “to bring over, to carry.”⁸ Mobility, and the movement across two spaces, contexts, or times, is therefore central to the English word’s origin. A similar idea is expressed by the French verb *traduire* [to translate], formed by the same preposition *trans-* and the Latin word *duco*, “to pull, to drive, to lead.”⁹ Although *to translate* and *traduire* have similar Latin roots, their emphasis is slightly different: one places the onus on the effort that is required to carry across, the other draws our attention to the direction of the movement. The Pular verb *firugol*¹⁰ [to translate] is closely associated with the notions of meaning and interpretation. The conjugated form *ko firi* can be translated into English as “it means.” In the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea, where Labé, the site of my fieldwork, is located, *firugol* is also used to designate a ceremony during which attendees interpret the Quran, a practice that carries significant prestige (Diallo 2015, 272). The Pular verb brings the act of translating into the realm of interpretation and evokes its connections to religious life and the sacred. Together, *to translate*, *traduire*, and *firugol* draw attention to a few important elements of translation as an activity: it requires effort and work (*to translate*), it involves movement across and between distinct linguistic worlds (*traduire*), and it has ethical implications

8 See: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/translate>

9 See: <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/traduire>

10 In the French transliteration, it is sometimes written as *firougol*.

(*firugol*). This is important because, as Diagne reminds us, to conceive of translation as a movement between distinct realms or worlds, and thus, as an action that creates a relation between these two worlds, does not mean that translating necessarily leads to a positive outcome or better understanding between these worlds. In fact, once two or more languages are brought together through the act of translation, various power dynamics and asymmetries appear. In many Global South contexts shaped by the colonial encounter and its violence, translation has been central to the imposition of the colonial order and its domination. In such contexts, are different kinds of transactions and movements between languages that have been organized according to colonial hierarchies possible? Are relations characterized by equality, equivalence, and reciprocity possible across (post-)colonial lines? This is the question at the heart of *Taiwan Travelogue*, and, here, Yáng's historical novel offers a stark yet salutary reminder: Good intentions are never enough, and worse, they can be violently detrimental. As Ms. Wáng, Aoyama's Taiwanese interpreter, explains to her employer, in a pivotal scene when she finally confronts the discomfort she feels around Aoyama-san and decides to ask that they "maintain a strictly professional relationship" (Yáng 2024, 229):

You are noble, considerate, and kind, Aoyama-san—you are willing to go above and beyond on my behalf. But it is precisely *because* you would never let me sleep in the servant's room, *because* you are outraged when somebody looks down on me for my status, that I have no idea how to make you understand. How do I explain myself so that I don't seem like an unreasonable child who covets your equal treatment yet paradoxically defies your kindness? The truth is that I am the same as Tân-san. The truth is that gentle Aoyama-san never once asked me, "Do you want this protection?" (Yáng 2024, 229)

The point is reiterated a few pages later when Yáng, through the voice of the other interpreter in the story, Mishima, notes:

There is nothing in the world more difficult to refuse than self-righteous goodwill. (Yáng 2024, 247)

The Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, a key thinker on translation, once noted that “[...] *there is no writing innocently*, and that what we say and how we say it is *all* in the form of what we write” (Glissant 2006, 71). The French *traduire*, which also means — *ko firi* — *to bring to justice*, is perhaps more accurate then. *Firugol* or *to translate* does indeed require ethical positioning. This is also the argument made by Diagne in the introduction to *De langue à langue: L’hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022) when he presents an optimistic vision of what translation can do and its potential to “create a relation of equivalence, of reciprocity between identities, to make them appear together [comparaître¹¹ in French] on an equal footing, so that from language to language we can speak and understand each other”¹² (Diagne 2022, 14). Yet, as he rightly notes: “Optimism is not naivety” (Diagne 2022, 14). Where to begin?

3. Translation and Hospitality

Translating creates a relation between two languages, sometimes more. At its heart is an encounter between two — or more — languages

11 Diagne in the French original plays on the double meaning of *comparaître* which means both *to appear together* but also *to appear in front of the court, to be brought to justice*.

12 The translation from French is mine.

that are in some sense foreign to each other, or at a minimum distinct. Encounters between strangers have historically been characterized by a wide spectrum of relations ranging from domination, annexation, cooptation, or annihilation, to collaboration, comprehension, or fusion, amongst others. This is why, when Diagne notes that colonialism tends towards monolingualism, it is not that colonial power lives in isolation and does not engage with strangers. Rather, colonial power, by nature expansionist, needs to move beyond the confines of the colonial language. As Diagne notes, “colonization needs translators” (Diagne 2022, 60). But colonial authority approaches encounters with other languages from a position of domination, whether through assimilation, annexation, or erasure. Colonial power can only imagine its language as superior, creating a situation of linguistic encounter known as diglossia (Casanova 2015, 129), which can be defined as a “situation of bilingualism in which one of the languages is considered as inferior and, thus, accorded cultural capital of lesser value,” to quote Diagne (2022, 16). To move from a diglossic relation towards one of bilingualism, Diagne, along with Glissant, and to an extent, Yáng, invites us to foreground hospitality as a key value of translation and counter to domination, annexation, annihilation, or erasure.¹³ Tellingly, in *Pullo*¹⁴ or *Fula* culture, including that of the *Fulbe* Fouta in Guinea’s Fouta Djallon, much of social life and particularly how one should relate to others and behave in public is regulated by what is often described somewhat approximately as a moral code known as

13 Diagne’s 2022 book *De langue à langue* includes the epitaph « Pour comprendre l’autre, il ne faut pas l’annexer mais devenir son hôte » [to understand the other, we must not annex her/him but rather her/ his guest], a quote by Louis Massignon, a French Catholic scholar of Islam, widely considered as a pioneer of Catholic-Muslim mutual understanding.

14 *Pullo* is the Pular word corresponding to *Fula* in English or *Peul* in French. It is the singular form, whereas *Fulbe* is the plural, meaning *Fula* people or *Peuls*.

Chapter 2
From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research

Pulaaku.¹⁵ Amongst other things, *Pulaaku* emphasizes hospitality as a key Fula value, and invites specific practices when encountering a stranger, a relation of hospitality that is specific to strangers and distinct from how one should welcome a close family member, for instance. As Riesman explains in *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (Riesman 1974), in Fula villages:

When a stranger appears at your door, the first thing you must do after the greetings is offer him (*sic*) something to drink and, possibly, to eat. If he (*sic*) accepts, the most polite thing for the host to do is to leave him (*sic*) in the hut, with the door closed, and wait until the guest reopens it. For a stranger, it is more polite to accept what the host offers rather than refuse it. A refusal suggests either greater familiarity or that one has come only to talk business and wants to get down to it immediately. (Riesman 1974, 184)

What does this have to do with translation? If translation is a practice of encounter between foreign languages, then perhaps *Pulaaku*'s injunction to act in specific ways in the presence of strangers can offer us some insights. While offering drink and food to visiting strangers is common to many, if not most, cultures around the world, the injunction to leave the stranger alone with the food while the host waits outside is more specific to Fula culture and the *Pulaaku*. It allows the stranger to engage with the gift on their own terms, giving them time to do so without immediately stating their needs, feelings, and reactions (Riesman 1974, 184). Riesman recounts the great discomfort people felt when he received strangers incorrectly while conducting ethnographic research amongst Fulbe villagers in Mali, committing such errors as “waiting

15 For a detailed discussion of *Pulaaku*, see Paul Riesman's now classic ethnographic study of Fula culture, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (1974).

until someone asked for a drink instead of offering it immediately” or “giving a calabash of water to someone outside instead of inviting him (*sic*) to have it inside where he would not have to undergo the shame of being seen in the act of satisfying a need” (Riesman 1974, 184). In some ways, colonial translation works in a similar way, taking non-colonial languages and words outside of their contexts and consuming them on the host’s terms rather than the guest’s or stranger’s (Diagne 2022, 55). The metaphor may be a little overplayed, but I do think that relations of hospitality when understood as part of long-standing “moral codes” such as *Pulaaku* can helpfully inform practices of translation in academic research. In my own work, I have tried as much as possible to keep the original text in its original language rather than always succumb to the injunction to bring say Pular or Susu words into French or English, colonial languages that also serve as academic ones, thereby reinforcing their “hypercentrality” (Diagne 2022, 16). This leaves nonspeakers time to engage with these terms “inside,” encountering them on their own terms, rather than “outside,” where they have been transformed by the presence of the other language. For instance, in a chapter that draws on recent activist practices by young people in Guinea, I build on recent theories in Anglophone scholarship that have proposed the term “choreography” as a useful heuristic to make sense of digital organizing and activist practices (Gerbaudo 2012). To untether the concept of “choreographing” from its Greek origin, I propose the term *dundunba*, a word of Mande origin, found in both Maninka and Susu, that is related to *dundun*, a large drum that, together with the *djembe*, is central to Mande ensembles in West Africa, as a useful heuristic to make sense of digital organizing and youth activism. Whereas the term *choreography* is directly associated with the Greek genealogy of dance which separates dancers and choreographers, stage and audience, *dundunba* is instead what Sheron Wray describes as a “cultural

polyseme” designating a “social occasion, [...] the word simultaneously describes the name of the dance, the music, and the event” (Wray 2017, 64). *Dundunba* as a concept for making sense of youth digital activism then shed lights on different aspects of organizing practices, blurring the lines between events, texts, and movements. In my writing, I have chosen to keep the term in its original language rather than translate it into French or English — itself an act of translation. Here again, Yáng’s *Taiwan Travelogue* provides an interesting example of translating in ways that create relations of hospitality rather than as a technical exercise. In the novel, presenting itself as a work of translation, the reader encounters words as existing across several linguistic worlds in 1938 Taiwan, then under Japanese occupation.¹⁶ The names of foods, for instance, are offered to the readers in both their Taiwanese Hokkien and Japanese spellings. In the (fictional) introduction and footnotes, readers are introduced to Chinese characters, Taiwanese Hokkien, and Japanese terms. Although widely seen as derogatory, the colonial and now-obsolete Japanese term *Shina* to designate China is retained throughout the book, with a short explanatory footnote from King, the (real-life) English translator of the novel, to let readers experience colonialism and its manifestation in language more directly. This is also the approach that we have encouraged at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South, under our cross-cutting research theme “Epistemologies and Genealogies of the Global South.” In a forthcoming edited volume on *Southern Digitalities* (2026), which tries to reimagine what happens to our theories of the digital once we center on the digital’s manifestations in the Global South, contributors draw on terms in Arabic, Chinese, or Vietnamese to theorize digitality from these contexts. The terms are again first offered in the original language and script to invite readers

16 Taiwan became an annexed territory of the Japanese Empire in 1895 and remained under Japanese control until 1945.

into these linguistic worlds rather than bring these worlds to English.

4. Footnotes and Other Lieux-communs/ Common-Places

In a brief note introducing an interview he conducted with *Taiwan Travelogue* author Yáng and the novel's English translator King, editor-in-chief of literary magazine *Litro*, Erik Akoto remarks:

The footnotes, afterwords, false editorial apparatus and real translator's note keep reminding the reader that language is never neutral. A place can be renamed. A meal can carry history. A romance can hide hierarchy. A footnote can be both joke and wound.¹⁷ (Akoto 2026)

And indeed, in *Taiwan Travelogue*, a novel disguised as a translation, these often-overlooked textual elements, typically viewed as add-ons or minor information placeholders to support the centerpiece text, become part and parcel of the novel itself. The footnotes, (fictitious) introduction, and afterwords are invited in by Yáng, and in the Japanese and English translations, by the novel's (real-life) translators, Miura Yūko and Lin King respectively, to participate in the main text itself, and occupy a central part of the story. We find this approach echoes in the work of Glissant. In *Poétique de la Relation*¹⁸ (Glissant 1990), for instance, the book ends with a section entitled in French "Notes en

17 See: <https://www.litromagazine.com/art-technology/yang-shuang-zi-lin-king-taiwan-travelogue-interview/>

18 Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation*, published in French in 1990, is the third volume in a group of texts by Glissant collectively known as *Poétique*. *Poétique de la Relation* was translated into English by Betsy Wing in 1997 under the title *Poetics of Relation*, published by University of Michigan Press.

Lieux Communs,” translated in English as “Notes in Common Places.” These notes are provided in addition to the footnotes that accompany the main text and are even organized by chapter and include numbered references, as is common practice for foot- or end- notes. What distinguishes these *Notes en Lieux Communs* is that they tend to be quite long, and many include paragraphs and present arguments to accompany, complement, or reflect on the arguments of the core text. They represent an original and imaginative use of endnotes that illustrates Glissant’s “archipelagic” rather than “systematic” or “systematizing” thought.¹⁹ As researchers working across multiple languages, we tend to make greater use of footnotes, endnotes, notes, and other textual genres often dismissed as minor, technical, purely informational, and thus, “neutral.” Looking back at my own work, it is clear that many of the words translated across French, Pular, Susu, Maninka, or English are often accompanied by a brief footnote or endnote, explaining who and how these were translated, or providing some notes on the word’s etymology, connotations, or cultural resonance. What authors such as Yáng or Glissant have done in their embrace of both what Glissant calls the “art of translation” and of endnotes, footnotes, afterwords, or introductions, is to consider these easily overlooked elements of texts as texts in their own right. It is in such practices of writing, never neutral, that imbalances between languages can be addressed, at least temporarily, moving away from the dangers of diglossia towards multilingualism.

5. Conclusion

19 For a detailed discussion of Glissant’s archipelagic and its relation to universalizing discourses, see Mohamed Lamine Rhimi’s « Les « lieux-communs » de la pensée archipélique et la problématique de l’universel chez Édouard Glissant » (2023).

In conclusion, I would like to share a quote from Diagne's Book *De langue à langue. L'hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022), which illustrates the work at hand:

The Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame wrote that in his Kinyarwanda language the cogito of Descartes is untranslatable: in this language, you cannot say, "I think therefore I am," he is clearly just referring to the fact that this absolute use of the verb "to be" in the expression "I am" to mean "I exist" is characteristic of certain languages that use the copula, of which Kinyarwanda is not one. But, if we do not focus on the effort of translating word to word, Descartes's *Discourse on Method* along with the cogito can perfectly well be translated into Kinyarwanda as into any language – unless, that is, we believe in the essential incompleteness of certain languages as compared to others, a point that I have already mentioned. It is true, however, that this will necessarily involve mobilizing the resources of the language in a way that will teach us something about the cogito, about what its wording owes to the fact that it is in Latin or French, and also about the way in which Kinyarwanda inclines us to think. But this is what happens in any translation. Transferring meanings from one language to another is a form of decentering that can teach us many lessons. And to understand the benefits of translation, to think from language to language, you have to remember Goethe's saying that a person who knows only one language does not actually know anything about even that one. (Diagne 2022, 66)

Glissant, Yáng, and Diagne invite us to consider that this work of "decentering," which Diagne describes here, might require reimagining how we construct a text, including where we write and what we consider

to be minor or central. But most importantly, together, they remind us that the work of translating is an uncomfortable, yet also often joyous affair.

References

- Bergère, Clovis, Marwan M. Kraidy, and Marina R. Krikorian. 2026. *Southern Digitalities: Reimagining Digital Studies from the Global South*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Casanova, Pascale. 2015. *La langue mondiale*. Paris: Seuil.
- Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. 2022. *De Langue à langue: L'hospitalité de la traduction*. France: Albin Michel.
- Diallo, Abdourahmane. 2015. *Précis de grammaire et de lexique du peul du Fouta Djallon*. Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
- Gerbaudo, Paulo. 2012. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (1st ed.). London: Pluto Press. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183pdzs>>
- Glissant, Édouard. 1990. *Poétique de la Relation [Poétique III]*. France: Gallimard.
- . 2006. *Une Nouvelle Région du Monde*. France: Gallimard.
- Rhimi, Mohamed Lamine. 2023. « Les “lieux-communs” de la pensée archipélique et la problématique de l’universel chez Édouard Glissant », *Savoirs en lien*, 2. <DOI: 10.58335/sel.310>
- Riesman, Paul. [(1974) 1977]. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography*. translated by Martha Fuller. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wray, Sheron. 2017. Just after the Pulse, Rhythm Takes All: The Inside Habitat of Improvisation. In C. Adair and R. Burt (eds.), *British Dance: Black Routes*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Yáng Shuáng-zǐ. [2024 (2020)]. *Taiwan Travelogue* [translated by Lin King]. Sheffield, UK: And Other Stories Publishing

Online Resources:

Akoto, Eric (Interview by). 2026. The Country Inside the Footnotes: Yáng Shuāng-zǐ and Lin King on Taiwan Travelogue. *Litro Magazine*. <<https://www.litromagazine.com/art-technology/yang-shuang-zi-lin-king-taiwan-travelogue-interview/>>

etymonline: Online Etymology Dictionary. <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/translate>>

traduire, Définition du dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 8e édition (1935). <<https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/>>

Chapter 3

Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic, Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

Ammar Khashan

1. Introduction

I should say from the beginning that I am not a linguist, and that I have never conducted research on language as such. My field is Islamic economics, and in recent years Islamic welfare in particular. But my attachment to language, and to Arabic above all, is older than any of my academic work. From an early age I was fascinated by the capacity of Arabic to articulate meaning, and I always thought that if I spent my whole life studying Arabic, it would not be enough. For that reason, I never imagined that I would give my time, let alone my affection, to another language. Then, a little more than ten years ago, I found myself in Japan, a country where I had never expected to live, facing a language I had never expected to study.

Living between the two languages soon became more than a private circumstance. My daily work consists, quite literally, of moving meanings between them: Arabic legal and economic concepts have to be explained in Japanese lecture halls and in English publications, and Japanese scholarly ideas have to be carried back into Arabic. Anyone who does this for years discovers that languages are not neutral containers. Some meanings cross easily, some cross with damage, and some refuse to cross at all. The theme of this volume, the movement of language and knowledge in a new era, is therefore, for me, a daily

condition of work, not an abstract topic.

You may ask why these two languages in particular deserve to be set side by side. Part of the answer is biographical, but part of it is substantive. Arabic and Japanese are, in a sense, maximal strangers: they belong to unrelated families, they are written in opposite directions with entirely different scripts, and they encode the position of the speaker in society according to very different logics. Precisely because the distance between them is so great, the crossing between them is instructive. A meaning that survives the journey from Arabic to Japanese has been tested severely, and a meaning that does not survive tells us something about both shores.

These pages are therefore reflections from inside the two languages rather than a linguist's comparison. They begin from the plain facts about Arabic and Japanese, because the facts themselves are instructive, and they then turn to the question that interests me most: how meaning moves, and fails to move, between two linguistic worlds, and what a person who lives in both of them comes to see.

2. Two Linguistic Worlds

(1) Speakers, Space, and Motivations

Both Arabic and Japanese are studied intensively by foreigners, but people come to the two languages through very different doors. In my experience, most learners of Japanese are drawn first by the culture: anime and manga above all, then cuisine, cinema, and the traditional arts. Most learners of Arabic come to it through Islam. There are today about two billion Muslims in the world (Pew Research Center 2025), and nearly all of them acquire at least an elementary contact with Arabic, enough to recite the Qur'ān and to perform the daily prayers,

Chapter 3
Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences

while a much smaller group studies the language for research. The asymmetry of motivation is itself revealing: one language attracts through its cultural products, the other through its scripture. This difference will return more than once in the following pages.

The demographic and geographic profiles of the two languages differ just as sharply. Estimates vary with the method of counting, but current reference works put the number of Arabic speakers above four hundred million, of whom roughly three hundred million speak it as their first language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2025). Arabic is the official or co-official language of the twenty-two member states of the Arab League, and it holds official status in several countries beyond it. Its homeland is a belt of territory stretching from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Indian Ocean, more than thirteen million square kilometers in extent, and migration has carried it further still: Arab communities in Europe and the Americas continue to use the language at home, and the second generation still studies it, or at least hears it, in the family. Japanese, by contrast, is spoken by some 123 million people, almost all of them within Japan itself, an archipelago of roughly 378,000 square kilometers (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2025). One language is spread across a vast and porous space shared by many states; the other is concentrated, to a degree rare among the major languages of the world, in a single country of which it is the national language.

Both languages like to describe themselves as ancient, and both are, but the historical record deserves to be stated carefully. The name of the Arabs enters written history in the ninth century BCE: the Kurkh monolith of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, recording events of 853 BCE, lists among his enemies a certain “Gindibu the Arab,” the first clear attestation of an Arabic word (Al-Jallad 2018, 315). Texts composed in a language that scholars now recognize as Old Arabic survive from around the turn of the Common Era: the desert inscriptions of the Safaitic corpus, two

lines of an Arabic prayer embedded in the ‘Ēn ‘Avdat inscription, and the famous Namāra epitaph of 328 CE (Al-Jallad 2018). The Japanese case is curiously parallel. Chinese dynastic histories of the third century CE preserve a handful of Japanese names and titles in Chinese transcription, but books written in Japan itself begin only in the eighth century, with the *Kojiki* of 712 and the great poetry anthology *Man’yōshū* (Frellesvig 2010). In other words, both languages first enter the historical record through the writing systems of others: Arabic, apart from the desert graffiti in local North Arabian scripts, through Assyrian cuneiform and later the Nabataean script, Japanese through Chinese characters. Even at the very beginning, what we know of each language is the product of a crossing.

(2) Families, Scripts, and Dialects

Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family (Meyer and Wolff 2019). It is written from right to left in a cursive script of twenty-eight letters, and its grammar is built on the logic of consonantal roots, to which I return below. Japanese belongs to the small Japonic family, whose other members are the Ryukyuan languages of Okinawa and the southern islands; these are popularly regarded as dialects of Japanese, but they are in fact distinct languages of the same family, whose first division falls precisely between Japanese and Ryukyuan (Shimoji 2022, 1–2). Japanese is written in a combination of three scripts: Kanji, the characters adopted from Chinese, and the two syllabaries Hiragana and Katakana, each sign of which represents a mora, the rhythmic unit of Japanese, rather than a single sound. A Japanese sentence normally mixes all three systems, something that has no counterpart in Arabic, where a single alphabet serves every purpose.

For all their differences, the two languages share one condition: each of them lives together with a family of dialects. In Arabic, alongside

Modern Standard Arabic, the shared written and formal language, there are five broad groups of spoken dialects: the Egyptian, the Levantine, the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghribi, and the Mesopotamian, each with its own internal variety (Versteegh 2014). Arabs grow up, in effect, bilingual within Arabic itself, speaking a dialect at home and acquiring the standard language at school. Linguists call this condition diglossia, and the classic description of it was drawn in large part from Arabic (Ferguson 1959); how such layered repertoires open out into full multilingualism is a question my co-editor pursues, from African ground, elsewhere in this volume. Japanese, too, comprises a standard language and regional dialects, divided primarily into an Eastern branch, which includes Tokyo, and a Western branch, which includes Kyoto and Osaka, with the dialects of Kyushu and of Hachijō island often counted as further branches; the Ryukyuan varieties, as noted above, stand outside this picture altogether (Shimoji 2022). The difference lies in scale: the internal variety of Arabic stretches across more than twenty states, while that of Japanese is contained within one.

(3) Words and Grammar

The vocabularies of the two languages expand in entirely different ways. Most Arabic words are generated from a root of three consonants, which can be shaped into a whole family of related meanings. From the root k-t-b (ك-ت-ب), which carries the idea of writing, Arabic derives *kataba* (كَتَبَ, “he wrote”), *kitāb* (كِتَاب, “book”), *kātib* (كَاتِب, “writer”), *maktaba* (مَكْتَبَة, “library”), and many more. Meaning branches outward from the root like a tree. Japanese vocabulary is instead built up in historical layers: a native Japanese stratum, a very large Sino-Japanese stratum written in kanji, such as 学校 (*gakkō*, “school”) and 本 (*hon*, “book”), and a stratum of loanwords written in katakana, from パン (*pan*, “bread”),

taken from Portuguese in the sixteenth century, to the flood of English borrowings of the modern era. What happens to words when they make such journeys, and what happened to one Arabic word in particular on its way into Japanese, is a story I keep for the next section.

The grammatical contrasts are just as instructive. The unmarked word order of formal Arabic is verb–subject–object: كتب الطالب الوظيفة, *kataba al-ṭālib al-waṣīfa*, “The student wrote the homework.” Japanese is a subject–object–verb language: 私はリンゴを食べました, *Watashi wa ringo o tabemashita*, “I ate an apple,” and in practice the subject is very often omitted altogether, for reasons that are cultural as much as grammatical and that I discuss later. Arabic marks gender and number throughout the sentence: a male friend is *ṣadīq* (صديق), a female friend *ṣadīqa* (صديقة), several friends *aṣḍiqāʾ* (أصدقاء), and the verb changes its form with the gender and number of its subject. Japanese marks neither: 友達 (*tomodachi*) serves for a friend of either sex and for any number of friends, and the verb does not change. This makes Japanese simpler in one respect, but this obligatory marking is part of what gives Arabic its characteristic explicitness.

Finally, each language has its own way of complicating the relation between writing and sound. In Arabic, the short vowels are normally not written at all; they are supplied by the reader, or indicated by the diacritical marks known as *tashkīl*. The same three letters yield كَتَبَ (*kataba*, “he wrote”) and كُتِبَ (*kutub*, “books”); the same skeleton gives قُبِّلَ (*qubla*, “a kiss”) and قِيلَ (*qibla*, “the direction of prayer”), خُطِبَ (*khutba*, “sermon”) and خُتِبَ (*khiṭba*, “betrothal”). The reader of unvowelled Arabic is therefore always interpreting as he reads. Japanese complicates the relation from the opposite side: one kanji may carry several readings, a Chinese-derived *on-yomi* and a native *kun-yomi*, so that 水 is read *sui* in compounds but *mizu* on its own, and a character such as 行 can be read *kō*, *gyō*, *i*, *okona*, or *yuki* according to context. In Arabic, one written

form opens onto several vocalizations; in Japanese, one character opens onto several readings. Both their readers are interpreters, but they are interpreting in different directions.

These structural differences are real, and living with them daily is an education in itself. Yet in my experience the deepest difference between the two languages is not structural at all. It concerns their relation to time, and it is to this that I now turn.

3. The Anchored Language: The Qur'ān and the Stability of Arabic

The most consequential fact about Arabic, for anyone who compares it with other languages, is its stability. The Arabic that the Qur'ānic revelation fixed in the early seventh century CE, and that the grammarians later codified, resembles the written Arabic of today to a degree that has few parallels among the world's major languages. An educated Arabic speaker can open the Qur'ān, a text of more than fourteen centuries ago, and follow its general meaning without a dictionary. The text certainly has sophisticated levels of meaning that demand long study, and the sciences of exegesis exist for that reason, but the surface of the language is not foreign to any literate Arab. There is no equivalent of the training an English reader needs before attempting Beowulf, or even Chaucer.

Two honest qualifications belong here. The claim concerns the written and formal language: spoken Arabic has changed as much as any tongue on earth, as the dialects described above testify. And Arabic is not entirely alone in the depth of its readable past: Greek, Icelandic, and written Chinese are also famous for it. What has few parallels is the mechanism of the stability, and it is this mechanism that concerns me.

Arabic owes its stability to one significant factor. The revelation of the Qur'ān fixed a prestigious form of the language, based, in the

tradition's own account, on the dialect of Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, together with elements drawn from other tribal varieties of the Arabian Peninsula, and the many local accents that the early philologists still recorded gradually receded from the written language. The entire discipline of Arabic grammar arose, in the second Islamic century, largely in the service of this text: its declared purpose was to describe the language of the Qur'ān so exactly that it could not be corrupted. Since then, the vocabulary of Arabic has grown enormously, and scholars in every generation have worked to accommodate new concepts and the need to describe ever changing daily life, but the core structure, the grammar and the morphology, has remained essentially what it was. The language has, so to speak, dropped anchor.

The Qur'ān itself insists on its own Arabic character with striking persistence. The adjective occurs eleven times. The revelation is called *qur'ānan 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic Qur'ān" (Q 12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3), and *lisānan 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic tongue" (Q 16:103; 26:195; 46:12); one verse poses the rhetorical contrast between the foreign and the Arabic (Q 41:44); and once, uniquely, the revelation is called *ḥukman 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic ruling" (Q 13:37). The repeated point of these verses is intelligibility: the message was sent down in Arabic so that its first hearers, masters of that language, would understand it. But the last phrase goes further. The classical exegetes read the *ḥukm* as the revealed judgment itself, delivered as Arabic: the Qur'ān a discourse that decides and rules, not a neutral text that happens to be in Arabic (al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 9:326–327); and some modern voices have pressed further still, hearing in the phrase the claim that Arabic is not merely the medium in which the Qur'ān happens to be expressed, but an idiom that carries within it a way of ordering reason, logic, and life. Whether or not one follows them to that conclusion, the phrase shows how early and how deeply the language

Chapter 3
Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences

and the norm were bound together.

The anchoring of the language extended even to its sounds. The science of *tajwīd*, the discipline of the correct articulation of every letter and of the correct joining of words in recitation, did not exist at the time of the revelation, because it was not needed: the first hearers articulated the sounds correctly as a matter of course. It arose when non-Arabs entered Islam in large numbers and had to be taught how to pronounce what they were reading, so that they could recite and pray correctly. It is studied to this day in the context of the Qurʾān, but it is in effect a normative phonetics of recited Arabic, and it has held the pronunciation of the language steady for well over a thousand years. I know of no other language whose sounds have been guarded with this degree of institutional care for so long, with the possible exception of the Vedic recitation of Sanskrit.

Japanese shows what the ordinary life of a language looks like when there is no such anchor. The language has changed continuously and profoundly. A modern Japanese reader needs special training to read the texts of the Edo period comfortably, and the classical written language is studied at school almost as a second idiom. Even the spelling has moved: in the script reform of 1946 the historical kana spellings were retired in favor of spellings that follow modern pronunciation, so that the word for “to say,” long written いふ (*ifu*), is now written いう (*iu*) (Frellesvig 2010). These are small differences taken one by one, but collectively they place the older language at a real distance from the present. None of this is a defect; it is simply what languages do. It is Arabic that is the exception, and the exception has a cause: a fixed, revered, constantly recited text at the center of the language’s life.

The consequence that matters for this chapter is direct. Because written Arabic is moored to a fixed scripture, its central words do not drift; they carry their whole semantic history on their backs, and they

resist being cut loose from it. A language anchored in this way holds its meanings tightly, and meanings that are held tightly do not travel lightly. What happens when such meanings are made to travel is where my own experience begins to speak.

4. What Crosses and What Does Not

Having lived inside both languages for years, I have slowly collected examples of what happens at the border between them. The examples that follow are not systematic; they are the ones that daily life kept putting in front of me until I was forced to think about them. Each shows a different kind of crossing, and a different kind of failure to cross.

(1) The Journey of a Word

Consider the most successful traveler I know: the word for coffee. In the classical Arabic dictionaries, *qahwa* (قهوة) originally denoted wine, so named, the lexicographers explain, because it curbs the drinker's appetite for food (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 15:206; Ibn Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-luġha*, 5:34); the name was later transferred to the new dark drink that spread outward from Yemen. From Arabic the word passed into Ottoman Turkish as *kahve*, from Turkish into the languages of Europe, and from Dutch, through the traders at Nagasaki, into Japanese, where it settled as コーヒー (*kōhī*), complete in time with its own invented kanji spelling, 珈琲, usually credited to the Dutch-learning scholar Udagawa Yōan. The word crossed four or five linguistic borders and survived them all. But look at what survived: the referent, a drink, and a battered sequence of sounds. Everything else was left at the borders. A Japanese speaker saying *kōhī* hears nothing of wine, nothing of Yemen, nothing of the long

Islamic debate over whether the new drink was permissible. The word arrived as a label stripped of its history.

I should add, in fairness, that the mangling of sounds is mutual. Japanese is often teased for what katakana does to foreign words: *intānetto* for internet is barely recognizable to an English ear. But Arabic is no better when it borrows. Our كمبيوتر (*kumbyūtir*) and تلفزيون (*tilifizyūn*) would puzzle their original owners just as much. Every language is hospitable to foreign things and violent to foreign sounds. Things cross easily; it is meanings, as we shall see, that resist.

(2) What the Eye Knows and What the Ear Knows

The two writing systems distribute the work of understanding between the eye and the ear in opposite ways, and this difference turns out to matter for how meaning moves.

Japanese writing gives an extraordinary privilege to the eye. A kanji often signifies a whole word or concept, so that a reader can grasp something of the meaning without knowing the pronunciation at all: one sees 学校 and understands “school” before one can say *gakkō*. The radicals reinforce this: characters containing the water element, such as 海 (*umi*, sea), 泳ぐ (*oyogu*, to swim), and 波 (*nami*, wave), announce their family visually. The price is paid by the ear. Japanese has a limited stock of syllables, and enormous numbers of words collapse into the same sound. The syllable *shi* alone may be 詩 (poem), 市 (city), or 師 (master, teacher); hearing it without the kanji or the context, one simply cannot know which is meant. For someone like myself, coming from a phonetic system, this remains one of the most difficult aspects of the language: in Japanese, sound underdetermines meaning, and it is the written character, or the situation, that decides.

Arabic is the mirror image. It is a language of the ear before the eye.

Meaning lives in precise articulation, which is why the tradition built the science of *tajwīd* around pronunciation, as described above, and why the ordinary written text omits the short vowels: the script underdetermines the word, and it is the reader's trained ear and grammatical sense that decide between *kataba* and *kutub*. In Arabic the eye trusts the ear; in Japanese, the ear trusts the eye.

This is not merely a curiosity. The visual logic of kanji gave Japanese a powerful machine for importing meaning. When Japan confronted the flood of Western concepts in the Meiji era, scholars could mint compact kanji compounds for them, such as 哲学 (*tetsugaku*) for philosophy, and the new words looked native from the day they were coined. Arabic, bound to its roots and its sounds, absorbs foreign concepts by derivation or transliteration and, in my experience, more slowly and more suspiciously. Here already is one asymmetry in the mobility of meaning between the two worlds, and I will return to its consequences in the next section.

(3) The Speaking Self

A second border runs not through the writing systems but through the sentence itself: the place each language gives to the speaking self. Arabic inscribes the self in the form of the sentence. The subject, even when no separate word expresses it, is carried by the verb, which marks the speaker's person, gender, and number, and directness in stating one's meaning is prized. Japanese leans the other way. The subject is omitted whenever context allows, which is most of the time. When I introduce myself, I say 立命館大学のアンマールです, *Ritsumeikan Daigaku no Anmāru desu*, literally "is Ammar of Ritsumeikan University": no "I" appears anywhere. The self is present, but it stands quietly to one side of the sentence.

Chapter 3
Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences

The grammar reflects a wider communicative order. Japanese is a contextual language: much of the meaning is carried by the situation, the relationship, and what is left unsaid. The distinction between 本音 (*honno*), what one really thinks, and 建前 (*tatema*), what one properly says, is taught by life to every foreigner in Japan; the elaborate system of honorific speech, *keigo*, adjusts the whole sentence to the relative position of speaker and hearer; and the common complaint 空気が読めない, *kūki ga yomenai*, “he cannot read the air,” shows that reading the unstated atmosphere is treated as a basic social competence. Arabic, by contrast, is in its grammar a textual language: it places the burden of meaning on what is explicitly and directly said, however elaborate the indirection of Arab speech may be in practice, and it expects the speaker to stand behind his words in person.

I am aware that generalizations of this kind have a bad reputation, and deservedly so. Japanese scholarship itself has spent decades criticizing the literature of Japanese uniqueness, and every sentence beginning “the Arabs” can be answered with a living Arab counter-example. I offer these contrasts, therefore, not as laws of national character but as a resident’s field impressions of two communicative defaults, each surrounded by enormous internal variety, and each renegotiated daily by the people who live inside it.

Classical Arabic literature offers an extreme but revealing witness. Al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), perhaps the most celebrated of all Arab poets, declared:

لَا بِقَوْمِي شُرْفْتُ بَلْ شُرِفُوا بِي • وَبِنَفْسِي فَخَرْتُ لَا بِجُدُودِي
lā bi-qawmī shurriḥtu bal shurriḥū bī • wa-bi-naḥsī fakhartu lā bi-judūdī

“Not through my people did I gain honor; it is they who were honored through me, and it is in myself that I take pride, not in my ancestors” (*al-Tibyān fī sharḥ al-Dīwān*, attributed to al-‘Ukbarī, 1:322). His individualism is extreme even by Arab standards, and the reading is

not confined to Arab critics: Larkin describes the “I” of his verse as displacing the patron himself from the focal point of the panegyric (Larkin 2008, 52, 128). No one should take a poet’s boast for a sociological description. But such a verse is conceivable in Arabic; it is very difficult to imagine its equivalent being composed, let alone celebrated for a thousand years, in Japanese.

(4) Language and Belonging

The most interesting border of all concerns who is allowed to belong to the language. Japanese society is famously welcoming to the foreigner who speaks its language well, and famously slow to count him as anything but a foreigner. The pattern admits exceptions, and I report it as a widely shared experience rather than a rule; still, however complete the mastery, the language can be learned while membership does not come with it. Arabic draws the boundary in the opposite place. Historically, alongside descent, the tongue itself was advanced as a criterion of being an Arab, and modern nationalism made it the criterion (Suleiman 2003). A report recorded by al-Muttaqī al-Hindī puts it with perfect clarity: “O people, the Lord is one and the father is one. Arabness is not from a father or a mother; it is a matter of the tongue (إنما هي اللسان, *innamā hiya al-lisān*), and whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab” (al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, *Kanz al-‘ummāl*, no. 33936, 12:47). The report reaches us *mursal*, without a Companion in its chain; Ibn ‘Asākir, who preserves it, adds that it is isolated, and Ibn Taymiyya judged it weak while defending part of its sense, namely that the rulings of the tongue belong to whoever acquires the tongue, “even if his origin be Persian” (Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 24:224–225; Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtidā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, 1:456, 461). I do not cite it as an established Prophetic saying; I cite it because its very circulation shows how deeply the idea took root. And

it is striking that al-Mutanabbī himself, in the verse that follows the one quoted above, defines the community he has just refused to be defined by in exactly these terms: وَبِهِمْ فَخْرُ كُلِّ مَنْ نَطَقَ الضَّادَ, *wa-bihim fakhru kulli man naṭaqa al-ḏāda*, “in them is the pride of all who utter the *ḏād*,” the letter that, as the classical commentary on the *Dīwān* puts it, none but the Arabs pronounce (*al-Tibyān*, 1:322).

This open door was not a theory; it was the working constitution of Arabic learning. Sībawayh (d. ca. 180/796), whose *Kitāb* is the earliest surviving and foundational grammar of Arabic, was of Persian origin. Ibn Jinnī al-Mawṣilī (d. 392/1002), one of the most original linguistic minds of the tradition, was the son of a Byzantine slave. Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), whose *Mu‘jam maqāyīs al-luġha* mapped the semantic roots of the language, came from the region of Qazvin; al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), whose *al-Kashshāf* remains a monument of Qur’ānic and rhetorical scholarship, came from distant Khwārazm. The compilers of the six canonical collections of ḥadīth came, all of them, from the Persian-speaking east: Bukhārā, Nīsābūr, Sijistān, Tirmidh, Nasā, Qazvin. The pattern hardly needs multiplying. For a thousand years, entry into Arabic was entry into the workshop of an entire civilization’s knowledge production, and the door was the language itself.

Things cross between the two worlds easily, stripped of their histories; sounds cross and are mangled; the deep settings of a language, the place of the self, the division of labor between eye and ear, the rules of belonging, do not cross at all. They can only be inhabited, and slowly learned. It is against this background that I want to look at the vocabulary I work with every day.

5. Meaning on the Move: Islamic Economic Vocabulary between Three Languages

My own field offers an unusually clear observation post for the mobility of meaning, because I must constantly say the same things in Arabic, English, and Japanese, and the three languages refuse to say them identically.

Begin with the discipline's own name. English "economics" descends from Greek *oikonomia*, the management of the household, and has come to name a science of scarcity and choice that presents itself as morally neutral. The Arabic word, *iqtisād* (اقتصاد), derives from *qaṣd*: aiming rightly, keeping to the just middle, which the lexicographers define, for expenditure, as the mean between extravagance and miserliness (Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 3:353–354). The root is Qurʾānic; the Book names the *muqtaṣid*, the one who keeps to the middle way, between the wrongdoer and the foremost in good works (Q 35:32), and counsels وَأَقْصِدْ فِي مَشْيِكَ, *wa-qṣid fī mashyika*, "be moderate in your walking" (Q 31:19). To speak of *iqtisād* in Arabic is thus already to speak of measure and rectitude, not merely of allocation. The Japanese word, 経済 (*keizai*), was pressed into service in the 1860s, on the eve of Meiji, as the translation of "economy," but it was cut down from the old Confucian phrase 經世濟民 (*keisei saimin*), "ordering the world and saving the people." Three languages, three moral genealogies: neutral management, right measure, ordering-and-saving. When one says "Islamic economics," ইসলাম 経済 (*Isurāmu keizai*), الاقتصاد الإسلامي (*al-iqtisād al-islāmī*), one is not saying quite the same thing three times.

Now take the term on which the whole edifice turns: *ribā* (ربا). The Qurʾānic verse is categorical: وَأَحَلَّ اللَّهُ الْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ الرِّبَا, *wa-aḥalla Allāhu al-bayʿa wa-ḥarrama al-ribā*, "And God has permitted sale and forbidden *ribā*" (Q 2:275). The root r-b-w means to increase, to grow, and in the language of the jurists the term came to cover, with great precision, any stipulated increase on a loan, together with certain inequalities, and certain delays, in the exchange of specified goods. The word is anchored, in the exact sense of the previous sections: it stands in a fixed scripture,

Chapter 3
Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences

surrounded by fourteen centuries of juristic elaboration, and every Arabic speaker who utters it stands in that history whether he intends to or not. What happens when it travels? The old English translation, “usury,” is a trap: in modern English usury means excessive interest, so the translation quietly converts a categorical norm into a complaint about degree. The newer translation, “interest,” is a different trap: it is technically closer, but it is a neutral accounting term, and the moral charge of the original evaporates in transit. Japanese offers 利子 (*rishi*), 利息 (*risoku*), 金利 (*kinri*), all perfectly serviceable and perfectly neutral words of modern finance, and all equally unable to carry what *ribā* carries. Faced with this, Japanese writing did not settle on one answer, and the disagreement teaches more than a settled practice would have. The best-known translation of the Qur’ān domesticated the word. Izutsu, whose version was the first made in Japan directly from the Arabic, uses the second of those three words throughout his revised edition of 1964, rendering *ribā* as 利息 (*risoku*), interest, at Q 2:275–278 as at Q 3:130 and Q 4:161 (Izutsu 1964, 1:68, 94, 139). Legal scholarship keeps the Japanese word but refuses to let it pass unmarked: Morozumi’s monograph on the prohibition carries 「利息」 in its own title, inside the brackets Japanese uses to hold a word at arm’s length, while the analysis itself proceeds in katakana as リバー (Morozumi 2011). The literature of Islamic economics goes furthest and declines to translate at all: there the word generally appears as リバー (*ribā*), glossed but not replaced (Nagaoka 2011, 53, 213–214). A fourth practice prints both, as when Kosugi writes *zakāt* as ザカート (喜捨), *zakāto* (*kisha*), the Arabic transliterated with an old Buddhist word for giving something away gladly set behind it in brackets (Kosugi 2009, 211).

Three renderings of one word, then, and a fourth device that refuses to choose, and each of them is a position rather than a preference. 利息 buys intelligibility at the price of the history. 「利息」 keeps the Japanese

word while flagging it as a stand-in for something the Japanese word is not. リバー keeps the history and asks the reader to learn a new word. ギャカート (喜捨) declines the choice and prints both. What deserves notice is not which of them has prevailed, for none has, but that Japanese can hold all four in view on the page: a syllabary reserved for foreign words, a stock of kanji, and a bracket convention give the translator instruments that make his decision legible. English has no comparable equipment. Italics can mark a word as foreign, but they cannot distinguish a term that has been borrowed from one that has been translated and then held under suspicion. As far as I can see, the division among these practices falls not by period but by audience and by burden. Where a Japanese word already carries the weight it is used and keeps its kanji: *ṣawm* is 断食 (*danjiki*), fasting, and the *hajj* is 巡礼 (*junrei*), pilgrimage, in Japanese writing on Islam as in Japanese writing on anything else. Where no Japanese word carries it, the term tends to cross as itself. *Ribā* sits on that boundary, which is why Japanese has written it in three ways within living memory. These are observations from reading rather than the findings of a systematic survey, and a fuller treatment, setting the successive Japanese versions side by side term by term, must wait for a separate study.

Here the writing system reappears as an agent in the story. Katakana gives Japanese a dedicated visual channel for words that are to be kept foreign: リバー (*ribā*), ムラーバハ (*murābaḥa*), タカーフル (*takāful*), ワクフ (*waqf*), ハラール (*ḥalāl*), and the rest of the working vocabulary of my field, including *zakāt* and its siblings, live in the Japanese texts of my own field inside this visible quarantine, present but marked, borrowed but not absorbed. The lesson I draw is that anchored words travel best untranslated. A term that carries its history cannot be exchanged for a local equivalent without losing precisely the thing that made it worth carrying; it can only be transliterated, glossed, and

slowly taught; students of translation have compiled a whole lexicon of such resistant words (Cassin 2014). Translation, for such words, is a negotiation, not a transfer, and the negotiation is never finished.

The reception of the field as a whole shows the same refraction on a larger scale. In the Anglophone world, “Islamic finance” is discussed above all as an industry: a market niche to be measured, regulated, and occasionally doubted, alongside a substantial critical and historical literature. In Japanese scholarship, much of it shaped by historically grounded area studies and standing outside both the Islamic tradition and the Western liberal one, a different reading became possible: a substantial body of work has approached Islamic economics as a financial civilization with its own view of the world, an economic system different from both capitalism and socialism, what Nagaoka calls a “great divergence” in the history of financial systems (Nagaoka 2011, 5, 186, 194; 2024, 71–72). I do not claim that one reading is right and the other wrong. I claim something more useful: that the same body of concepts genuinely means different things in the three scholarly worlds, jurisprudentially anchored norms in Arabic, an industry and its critics in English, an alternative modernity in Japanese, and that only a reader who moves among all three can see the refraction itself. The substance of those economic debates belongs to my other work (Khashan 2022); what belongs here is the movement, and what the movement reveals.

6. Conclusion

I have offered these reflections as what they are: the field notes of a traveler who ended up living on both shores. If they have a single lesson, it is that the crossing itself is a method. From inside one language, that language’s settings are invisible, as water is to a fish. It was Japanese that taught me that Arabic is a language of the ear; it was Arabic that

taught me how much of Japanese meaning lives outside the sentence; and it was the daily labor of carrying one vocabulary into the other that taught me the difference between words that travel and words that are anchored. A researcher who works in three languages is not merely three times equipped; he stands at an angle from which each language shows what the others conceal.

The era named in this volume's title gives these old questions a new urgency. Machine translation now performs these crossings, at enormous scale, one by one. It renders *ribā* as "interest" without hesitation, and 空気 (*kūki*) as "air," and it does so fluently, confidently, and at a scale no human mediation can match. Whether the anchored meanings of the world's languages will survive this new mobility, and who is actually speaking when the machine speaks so well, are questions too large for a closing paragraph; they are the subject of my second chapter in this volume.

Let me end where I began, with the personal. When I started studying Japanese, I was already thirty years old, and I did my best without expecting much. I remember thinking: who begins a language at this age and hopes for some benefit in the future? I was not young, I was very busy, and I believed I would never truly enter the language. But as I continued with this beautiful language, something changed, and a real relationship grew where I had expected only necessity. I still hope to find the time to go back and study it properly, to revisit what I learned when I first entered the Japanese language world. The deeper our understanding of a foreign language becomes, the more it grows upon us. And in an age when machines promise to spare us the crossing altogether, I find myself believing more, not less, in the slow, personal, transforming labor of learning another world from the inside.

References

- al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī. 1985. *Kanz al-‘ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa-l-aq‘āl*. Ed. Bakrī Hayyānī and Şafwat al-Saqqā. 5th ed. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla.
- (attributed to) Abū al-Baqā’ al-‘Ukbarī. 1936–38. *al-Tibyān fī sharḥ al-Dīwān*. Ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, and ‘Abd al-Ḥafīẓ Shalabī. 4 vols. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī.
- Ibn ‘Asākir, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan. 1995. *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*. Ed. ‘Umar b. Gharāma al-‘Amrawī. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Ibn Fāris, Aḥmad. 1969–72. *Mu‘jam maqāyīs al-lughā*. Ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. 2nd ed. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī.
- Ibn Manẓūr, Muḥammad b. Mukarram. 1414 AH. *Lisān al-‘Arab*. 3rd ed. Beirut: Dār Şādīr.
- Ibn Taymiyya, Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm. 1999. *Iqtiḍā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm li-mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*. Ed. Nāṣir al-‘Aql. 7th ed. Beirut: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub.
- al-Qurṭubī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad. 1964. *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*. Ed. Aḥmad al-Bardūnī and Ibrāhīm Aṭṭayyish. 2nd ed. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya.
- Al-Jallad, Ahmad. 2018. The Earliest Stages of Arabic and Its Linguistic Classification. In Elabbas Benmamoun and Reem Bassiouney (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 315–331.
- Cassin, Barbara (ed.). 2014. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2025. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 28th ed. Dallas: SIL International.

- Ferguson, Charles A. 1959. Diglossia. *Word* 15(2), 325–340.
- Frellesvig, Bjarke. 2010. *A History of the Japanese Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko. 1964. *Kōran* [The Koran], rev. ed., 3 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Khashan, Ammar. 2022. *Isurāmu keizai no genzō: Muhanmado jidai no hōkitei keisei kara gendai no kakushin made* [The original image of Islamic economics: From the formation of legal rulings in the age of Muḥammad to contemporary innovation]. Kyoto: Nakanishiya Shuppan. (in Japanese)
- Kosugi, Yasushi. 2009. “*Kuruān*”: *Katarikakeru Isurāmu* [The Qur’ān: Islam that speaks to us]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Larkin, Margaret. 2008. *Al-Mutanabbi: Voice of the ‘Abbasid Poetic Ideal*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Meyer, Ronny, and H. Ekkehard Wolff. 2019. Afroasiatic Linguistic Features and Typologies. In H. Ekkehard Wolff (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 246–325.
- Morozumi, Yoshiaki. 2011. *Isurāmu-hō ni okeru shin’yō to “risoku” kinshi* [Credit and the prohibition of “interest” in Islamic law]. Tokyo: Hatori Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Nagaoka, Shinsuke. 2011. *Gendai isurāmu kin’yūron* [A Study on Islamic Finance in the Modern World]. Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai. (in Japanese)
- . (ed.). 2024. *Isurāmu kara tsunagu 2: Kahei, shoyū, shijō no mobiriti* [Connectivity and Trust Building in Islamic Civilization 2: Mobility of Money, Ownership and Markets]. Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai. (in Japanese)
- Pew Research Center. 2025. *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Chapter 3
Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences

- Shimoji, Michinori. 2022. The Japonic Languages: An Introduction. In Michinori Shimoji (ed.), *An Introduction to the Japonic Languages*. Leiden: Brill, 1–24.
- Suleiman, Yasir. 2003. *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Versteegh, Kees. 2014. *The Arabic Language*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Chapter 4

Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation? Language, AI, and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

Ammar Khashan

1. Introduction

Several times a day, in the ordinary course of my work, I now do something that no scholar in history could do with this speed and fluency until the past decade: I hand a passage in one of my three working languages to a machine and receive, in less than a second, a fluent version of it in another. The translation is often good. Sometimes it is better than what I would have produced in an hour. And yet, each time, a small question repeats itself somewhere in my mind, and it has grown louder every year: who is speaking here? Not the author of the passage, who chose none of these words. Not I, who merely pressed a key. Not the machine, in any sense of “speaking” that we understand, for it does not know what it has said. The sentence stands there, confident and ownerless.

In the previous chapter I argued that languages hold some of their meanings at anchor: words moored to fixed texts and long histories, which resist being cut loose and carried across. I wrote there about what happens when human beings attempt the crossing. This chapter asks what happens now that the crossing has been mechanized. The question is not whether machine translation is useful; it is obviously enormously

useful, to me before anyone. The question is what kind of mediation it is, what it does to anchored meanings, and what it changes in the production of knowledge itself: who produces it, in whose words, and under whose responsibility.

These questions sound abstract, and the surest way I know to make them concrete is historical. Before we can say what has changed, we must remember, honestly and in some detail, what translation used to be: how long it took, how many hands it passed through, and how visibly each of those hands signed its work. I will follow two scriptures on their long journeys into Japanese, the Bible and the Qur'ān, because sacred texts are where the stakes of translation are highest, the records longest, and the anchored words most dense. I choose Japanese as the destination not only because I live in Japan, but also because Japan received both these books late, from far away, and through chains of intermediaries that are unusually well documented. What those chains teach us will then let us measure, in the second half of this chapter, exactly what the machine has altered.

2. When Translation Took Centuries: Sacred Texts on the Move

Consider first how slowly, and by how many named hands, the Bible moved westward before it ever turned toward Japan. Jerome's Latin Vulgate, itself a translation and the ancestor of a thousand others, occupied its maker for more than two decades at the turn of the fifth century. Twelve centuries later, when England resolved to make an authoritative version in its own tongue, the work was given to some fifty scholars organized in six companies, who labored seven years, from the commission of 1604 to the printing of 1611. Whatever one thinks of the results, the method is instructive: translation of scripture was understood

to be too consequential for one person, too difficult for one year, and too public for anonymity. Every name was known; every choice could be attacked, and was.

The Bible's arrival in Japan opens with a mistranslation so instructive that I have never found a better teaching example. When Francis Xavier reached Kagoshima in 1549, his Japanese informant and interpreter, Anjirō, rendered the Christian God with the name of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi, and for roughly two years the first Christian mission in Japan preached, in perfectly good faith, the worship of 大日, *Dainichi* (Elison 1973). The Shingon monks welcomed these foreign colleagues warmly. When Xavier at last understood what the word carried, he reversed himself in the streets, instructing his hearers not to worship Dainichi, and adopted instead the transliterated Latin: デウス, *Deusu*. The escape was only partial; local wits soon observed that *Deusu* sounded like 大嘘, *daiuso*, "the great lie." In two years, the mission had run the whole gauntlet that this chapter is about: translate the anchored word, and you import someone else's theology; transliterate it, and you import nothing, not even protection from mockery. I will return to this story, because the choice it dramatizes has never gone away.

The next act is stranger still. After the suppression of Japanese Christianity, the first published portion of the Bible in Japanese was produced in 1837, not in Japan but in Singapore, by a German missionary in Macau, Karl Gützlaff, who knew little Japanese and had never set foot in Japan. His teachers were three shipwrecked sailors, Otokichi, Iwakichi, and Kyūkichi, survivors of a cargo ship that had drifted disabled across the Pacific for fourteen months. With their help he translated the Gospel of John, and his choices show what happens when the chain of mediation is this thin: for God he reached for ゴクラク, *gokuraku*, the Buddhist paradise, and for the Logos of John's opening verse he settled on カシコイモノ, *kashikoi mono*, "the wise one." Three

Chapter 4
Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?

centuries after Dainichi, the same trap closed on another hand. I do not cite this to mock Gützlaff, who did what was possible with what he had; I cite it because it shows that before the modern era, the crossing of a sacred text could hang on three sailors blown off course.

The missionary establishment in Japan then did what institutional England had done. The Meiji Version was made by a standing committee of missionaries and Japanese scholars, with James Curtis Hepburn, the physician whose romanization system Japanese still uses, at its center; beginning its joint work in 1874, it completed the New Testament in 1880 and the Old in 1887, thirteen years in all. For the name of God, the committee chose 神, *kami*, a decision I will examine in the next section. What matters here is the regime: a named committee, a public method, and a pace measured in years per testament.

The Qur'ān's westward journey is, if anything, a purer specimen of mediated crossing. Its first full translation into Latin was the version commissioned by Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, and completed by Robert of Ketton in 1143, a paraphrase produced explicitly for refutation, which nevertheless served Europe as its Qur'ān for four centuries (Burman 2007). The first English Qur'ān, published by Alexander Ross in 1649, was not translated from Arabic at all, but from André du Ryer's French: a relay translation at the very origin of the English tradition. Only with George Sale in 1734 did English receive a Qur'ān made directly from the Arabic, followed in the nineteenth century by Rodwell in 1861 and Palmer in 1880.

Japan's reception reproduced this relay structure with remarkable exactness. The first Japanese Qur'ān, Sakamoto Ken'ichi's *Kōran-kyō* of 1920, was translated not from Arabic but from the English of Sale, Rodwell, and Palmer (Ōkawa 2004, 197): the Japanese reader of 1920 was reading Muḥammad's scripture through an intermediate language and a European tradition of translation eight centuries old. The chain

then grew a further link, if a report that circulates in the Japanese literature is to be believed: the first complete Chinese Qur'ān, published in 1927, is said to have been retranslated in its turn from Sakamoto's Japanese, so that a scripture revealed in Arabic would have reached Chinese readers as Arabic filtered through English filtered through Japanese, a triple relay. I repeat the claim as it circulates, not having verified it against the Chinese text. Ōkawa Shūmei's version of 1950 rested chiefly on Rodwell's English, with other European versions at hand (Ōkawa 2004, 207). Only in 1957 and 1958, with the three volumes of Izutsu Toshihiko's *Kōran*, did Japanese receive a complete translation made directly from the Arabic original, prepared with al-Bayḏāwī's classical commentary at the translator's elbow (Ōkawa 2004, 198, 207, 218); and only in 1972 did a Japanese Muslim, Mita Ryōichi of the Japan Muslim Association, produce a complete version made directly from the Arabic from inside the faith itself (Ōkawa 2004, 223). Thirty-seven years separate Japan's first Qur'ān from its first Qur'ān translated out of Arabic. For all that time, Japanese knowledge of Islam's founding text was, in the strict sense, second-hand and third-hand knowledge; and everyone could know it, because every link in the chain had a name, a preface, and a stated method. Izutsu's renderings are debated in Japan to this day, which is exactly the point: there was a person to debate.

Let me draw the baseline, then, in three plain features. Before the machine, the crossing of an anchored text was slow: years for a testament, decades for a tradition, centuries for a civilization. Its mediation was visible: when a version was made from English rather than Arabic, the preface said so, and the next generation could resolve to do better. And its responsibility was personal: Jerome, the six companies, Gützlaff and his sailors, Hepburn's committee, Sakamoto, Ōkawa, Izutsu, Mita, each stood behind a set of choices that could be praised, attacked, and

revised. Slowness, visibility, responsibility: keep these three in view. Everything the machine changes, it changes in one of these three.

3. Three Anchored Words: Khamr, Waqf, and the Name of God

Histories of whole texts can hide the sharpest difficulties, which live at the level of the single word. I therefore want to slow down and watch three words attempt the crossing: a rule of consumption, an institution of property, and the name of God. All three are anchored in the precise sense of the previous chapter, and all three come from the working vocabulary of my own field, which is what allows me to speak about them with some confidence.

(1) Khamr, or the Translator as Silent Jurist

The Qur’ānic verse that seals the prohibition reads: *إِنَّمَا الْخَمْرُ وَالْمَيْسِرُ وَالْأَنْصَابُ وَالْأَزْلَامُ رَجْسٌ مِنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ*, *innamā al-khamru wa-l-maysiru wa-l-anṣābu wa-l-azlāmu rijsun min ‘amali al-shayṭāni fa-jtanibūhu*, “Khamr and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are an abomination of Satan’s work, so keep away from it” (Q 5:90). The reader will notice that I have left the first word untranslated. This section explains why.

Within the Islamic legal tradition, the extension of the word *khamr* was itself a matter of dispute. The Ḥanafī jurists, in their classical doctrine, tied the term narrowly to the raw juice of the grape once it has fermented and become intoxicating, Abū Ḥanīfa himself requiring further that it cast up its froth (al-Sarakhsī, *al-Mabsūṭ*, 24:2; al-Kāsānī, *Bad’i’ al-ṣanā’i*, 5:112), treating other intoxicating drinks under separate and partly different rules, and answering the broader reports with the observation that they extend the ruling, not the name (*al-Mabsūṭ*, 24:4); the majority

of jurists read the term broadly, supported by the Prophetic statement *كُلُّ مُسْكِرٍ خَمْرٌ وَكُلُّ خَمْرٍ حَرَامٌ*, *kullu muskirin khamrun wa-kullu muskirin ḥarāmun*, “every intoxicant is *khamr*, and every intoxicant is forbidden” (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 2003). Whole shelves of jurisprudence hang on that difference, which I have examined elsewhere (Khashan 2022a, 113–114, 128–129). Now watch what happens when the verse goes into English. Sale, Rodwell, and Arberry write “wine”; Yusuf Ali writes “intoxicants”; Pickthall writes “strong drink.” Each of these renderings is defensible, and each quietly enacts a position in a juristic dispute of which the ordinary reader, and possibly the translator, has never heard. “Wine” narrows the verse in the direction of the Ḥanafī definition; “intoxicants” universalizes it in the direction of the majority; “strong drink” hovers between. The translator of *khamr* cannot help issuing a small *fatwā*. There is no neutral word to flee to, because the source word is not neutral: it arrives carrying its whole legal history, and the target language forces a choice among the possibilities that history has carefully kept open.

Japanese adds a further turn. The standard rendering at this verse in the Japanese Qur’ān translations is 酒, *sake*, which serves in Japanese both as the generic word for alcoholic drink and as the name of the national drink itself. The choice is reasonable; no better word exists, and Kosugi, adopting it, says as much in his own note: the original sense of *khamr* is grape wine, and the word came to be read of whatever intoxicates (Kosugi 2009, 232). But consider what rides along with it. 酒 is not a neutral chemical term in Japanese culture; it is the substance of hospitality, of seasonal ritual, and, in the form of 御神酒, *omiki*, of the offering set before the gods in Shinto shrines. The word chosen to carry the Qur’ān’s forbidden substance is the same word used for the drink offered to the *kami*. No error has been committed anywhere, and yet the verse now stands in a semantic terrain its revealer never addressed. This is what I mean when I say that anchored words are not translated so

Chapter 4
Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?

much as resettled: they must live, after the crossing, among neighbors they did not choose.

The care that was available here deserves to be stated, because it is precisely what the machine removes. Consider one case, chosen for a reason already given: the version of Izutsu Toshihiko, the philosopher of language and comparative thought whose *Qurʾān*, described above as the first to reach Japanese from the Arabic, is also the one most argued over in Japan, which makes it the natural place to look for a decision rather than a default. He revised the whole work for the Iwanami edition of 1964, and in that edition his handling of *khamr* can be followed occurrence by occurrence. The previous chapter followed the same scholar through another anchored word. He wrote 酒 at Q 5:90 (Izutsu 1964, 1:163), and he did not write it everywhere. Where one of Joseph's fellow prisoners dreams that he is pressing *khamr*, Izutsu writes 葡萄 (*budō*), grapes, and leaves the wine in the future (Izutsu 1964, 2:33); in Joseph's reading of that dream, where the man will pour *khamr* for his master, the word is 酒 again (Izutsu 1964, 2:34). Where the rivers of Paradise run with *khamr* he writes not 酒 but 美酒 (*bishu*), fine wine (Izutsu 1964, 3:126); and where the blessed pass the cup between them, in a verse that does not name *khamr*, he adds a gloss in brackets, (現世の酒飲みとは違って), unlike the drinkers of this world (Izutsu 1964, 3:151). One Arabic word, three renderings and a gloss, each decision taken in view of the verse in front of him. I take this as one instance and not as a survey of Japanese practice; what matters here is not what most translators did, but what a decision looks like when someone makes one. A reader who thinks any of these renderings wrong knows whom to argue with, when the choice was made, and what he said he was doing; and Izutsu said, in his own preface, that the translation of such a book is at bottom an impossible undertaking. That is the whole of the difference this chapter is about, and it survives only as long as there is a preface to read.

(2) Waqf, or Translation with the Force of Law

My second word is an institution. A *waqf* is created when an owner detains an asset from circulation and dedicates its benefit to a stated purpose, in most schools in perpetuity; the word itself comes from the root w-q-f, “to stop, to hold still” (on the institution’s juristic development, see Khashan 2022b). For the English translator, three candidates offer themselves, and each drags a legal ancestry behind it. “Mortmain” imports the medieval European suspicion of the dead hand that holds property beyond the grave. “Charitable trust” imports the whole apparatus of English equity, with its trustees, its beneficiaries, and its doctrine of what counts as charity. “Endowment” is the most neutral and the least informative. In ordinary scholarship the choice among these is a matter of nuance. In British India it became a matter of law, and the episode, which belongs at once to the history of translation and to the imperial and international history of law, deserves to be remembered by students of both.

Colonial courts, obliged to administer Islamic endowments, naturally read them through the nearest categories of English law, which meant the law of trusts and charities. Through that lens, the family *waqf*, in which the founder’s descendants benefit from the endowment before its ultimate charitable purpose matures, looked less like piety than like a device: a perpetual family settlement wearing a thin religious dress. Translation had prepared the doctrinal ground in the narrowest sense of the word: the authority under which the courts struck at family endowments went back to a footnote that Charles Hamilton had attached to his English rendering of the Ḥanafī manual, the *Hidāya*, itself made not from the Arabic but from a Persian version, so that the judges, as Kozlowski puts it, “based their decision on a footnote” (Kozlowski 1985, 142). The line of cases culminated in *Abul Fata Mahomed Ishak v.*

Chapter 4
Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?

Russomoy Dhur Chowdhry, decided by the Privy Council in December 1894, which held such endowments invalid. Lord Hobhouse, writing for the Board, declined to enforce what he called “abstract precepts taken from the mouth of the Prophet,” and dismissed the endowment’s provision for the poor as so many “empty words”; the same Hobhouse had earlier published a volume against perpetual trusts under the title *The Dead Hand* (Kozlowski 1985, 147–150). An institution with a millennium of juristic elaboration behind it was, in effect, translated into English legal categories and found ungrammatical. The response is equally instructive: Muslim jurists and publicists in India, Syed Ameer Ali at their head, argued the classical position in books and courtrooms, and in 1913 the legislature intervened, passing the Mussalman Wakf Validating Act to restore what the mistranslation had annulled (Kozlowski 1985, 186–191). It took an Act of the imperial legislature to carry one Arabic word back across the border. I know of no clearer demonstration that translation is not always a literary matter: when the translating language is also the ruling language, a reading error can dispossess families, and the correction of a gloss can require a statute. Japanese scholarship, coming to the same word without judicial power over it, could afford the gentler solution I described in the previous chapter, and simply writes ワクフ (*waqf*).

(3) The Name of God, or Four Centuries of One Choice

My third word is the heaviest a translator can be asked to carry. Japan’s engagement with it, across both scriptures, amounts to a complete experiment: in four and a half centuries, virtually every available strategy has been tried in public.

The first strategy was translation into the local sacred vocabulary: Anjirō’s *Dainichi*. Its failure was total and swift, as we saw, because a

name is the most anchored word of all; it does not describe its bearer, it summons a specific history, and Dainichi summoned the wrong one. The second strategy was transliteration: Xavier's Deusu, which held the theological line at the price of foreignness and mockery, and held it so well that the hidden Christians of the persecution centuries were still murmuring Deusu in their secret prayers two hundred years later. The third strategy was the dignified coinage: the Catholic 天主, *Tenshu*, "Lord of Heaven," a coinage of the China mission, lofty and, in Japanese, unoccupied. The fourth was the Meiji committee's choice, translation into the generic: 神, *kami*, the ordinary Japanese word for the ordinary Japanese gods, of whom tradition speaks in the myriads. The Protestant Bible thereby became readable at the cost of a permanent ambiguity, for every Japanese reader must now learn, against the grain of the word, that the *kami* of Genesis has no colleagues.

When the Qur'ān's turn came, the Japanese translators stood before the same fork, with the added weight that the source word, الله, *Allāh*, is the theological center of the entire text. The Japanese translations settled the question in the direction Xavier had chosen four centuries earlier: transliteration, アッラー, *Arrā* (Ōkawa 2004, 207, 218, 222). The name would remain foreign, visible, unassimilated, exactly as *ribā* and *waqf* remain in the literature of my own field; the katakana script, as I argued in the previous chapter, gives Japanese a dedicated shelf for such guests. What Japanese resolved by script, Arabic resolves by history running the other way: in Arabic there has never been anything to decide, because الله is simply the word for God, used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians before Islam and in every Arabic Bible since. One language accommodates the name by marking it as a guest; the other by never having treated it as one. And lest anyone think the question antiquarian, it remains live enough that in Malaysia the right of non-Muslims to use the word "Allah" in print has been fought through the courts within living memory.

Three words, then, and three long negotiations: a jurist's word that forces every translator to legislate, an institution that a mistranslation once annulled and a statute restored, and a name for which four centuries explored every strategy from annexation to quarantine. Notice what all three stories have in common. The negotiations were slow, they were conducted in public, and at every step there was someone, Anjirō or Hobhouse or Izutsu, whose choice it was, and who could be answered. Now compress the timescale from centuries to milliseconds and remove the someone. That is the experiment our own era is running, and it is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

4. The Machine Enters: A Short History of the Shift

The machine age of translation has a precise birthday. On January 7, 1954, at IBM's headquarters in New York, a team from Georgetown University and IBM demonstrated the first public machine translation system: an IBM 701 computer that turned more than sixty Russian sentences into English, using a vocabulary of 250 words and six rules of grammar (Hutchins 2004). The keypunch operator who entered the Russian did not know a word of it. Among the sentences the machine produced that day was one that reads, in retrospect, like a prophecy chosen by the event itself: "We transmit thoughts by means of speech" (Hutchins 2004). The press was ecstatic, and the researchers predicted useful machine translation within three to five years. The demonstration had, of course, been carefully staged around sentences the system could handle; but the deeper idea behind it, Warren Weaver's proposal of 1949 that translation might be treated as a kind of code-breaking, had entered the world, and it never left.

The correction came slowly and then officially. Twelve years of rule-based systems produced results so modest that the ALPAC report of

1966, commissioned by the United States funding agencies through the National Academy of Sciences, concluded that machine translation was slower, worse, and more expensive than the human labor it was meant to replace, and funding collapsed in the United States for a generation. It is worth pausing on why the early machines failed, because the reason is the subject of this chapter: their builders had assumed that meaning was in the words, and that words could be exchanged like coins. Everything I described in the previous sections, the anchoring of words in texts and histories, the juristic careers of single terms, the four-century negotiation over one divine name, is precisely what that assumption leaves out.

The field was transformed around 1990 on the strength of a philosophical surrender that deserves more attention than it usually receives. The statistical approach pioneered at IBM (Brown et al. 1990) abandoned the attempt to teach the machine grammar and meaning; instead, the machine would learn correlations from an enormous archive of existing translations made by human beings. For our story, this changes everything, because it means the machine's competence rests on the accumulated labor of past human translators, absorbed anonymously and statistically. Whatever the archive did, the machine does. Google Translate has carried this method to the public, free of charge, since 2006.

Then came the leaps that produced the world we now live in. In late 2016 the major systems switched to neural networks, and fluency improved almost overnight; in 2017 the Transformer architecture appeared (Vaswani et al. 2017), and it became the foundation of everything that followed; and from November 2022 the large language models turned translation into a byproduct of general text generation, conversational, tireless, and free. I want to be honest about the result, because nothing in this chapter depends on denying it: the quality is now extraordinary. Work that occupied Hepburn's committee for

thirteen years can be drafted in an afternoon; the decade Izutsu gave to the Qur'ān can be imitated, superficially but plausibly, in minutes. The first generation of human translators into Japanese, waiting years for a relay text to arrive by ship, could not have imagined such an instrument, and it would be ungrateful and untrue to pretend it is not a wonder.

But now audit the wonder against the baseline of Section 2 above. Slowness is abolished: the negotiation that took four centuries for one divine name is performed, or rather bypassed, in milliseconds. Visibility is inverted: Sakamoto's preface declared that his Qur'ān came through English, and the reader of 1920 could weigh that fact, whereas today's system declares nothing, neither its sources, nor its route, nor its confidence. And responsibility is vacated: the human translator, who, as Venuti taught us, was already being rendered invisible by the conventions of the publishing industry (Venuti 2008), has now been replaced by a mediator that has no self to be visible. The three features of the old regime have not been improved; they have been deleted. What follows from that deletion is the subject of the next section.

5. Who Speaks Now? The Ethics of Mediated Knowledge

The question in my title has a technical answer before it has an ethical one. Who speaks, when the machine translates, is the corpus: the archive of text on which the system was trained. And the corpus is not the world. On the standard count of the content languages of websites, English accounts for roughly half; Arabic, the language of more than four hundred million people and the liturgical language of two billion, for well under one per cent; Japanese, for all the wealth of its documentation, for about five per cent (W3Techs 2026), so that in the machine's world Japan too is a minority. These figures count websites, not the training corpus of any particular system. The machine is fluent

in proportion to what it has read, and it has read the world in wildly unequal shares. Its most confident voice is therefore the voice of the best-documented, which is to say, in practice, a particular register of English. Languages enter the machine unequal and come out sounding equally fluent, which is the most deceptive part: the fluency looks uniform, the understanding is not.

The inequality has a structural consequence that returns us, almost uncannily, to 1920. For language pairs poorly represented in the training data, systems long routed the translation explicitly through a better-resourced language, usually English, as a pivot; the multilingual neural models that replaced this design can translate without an explicit intermediate step (Johnson et al. 2017), but English remains overwhelmingly dominant in their training mixtures, and its categories arguably continue to perform an analogous mediation inside the model (Fan et al. 2021). An Arabic sentence bound for Japanese may thus still travel, openly or invisibly, a version of Sakamoto's route, Arabic into English into Japanese, with one difference that changes the ethics of the situation entirely: Sakamoto's relay was announced in his preface, and the machine's relay is announced nowhere. Recall *khamr*. If the hidden middle language renders it "wine," then the Ḥanafī narrowing I described has been silently enacted inside the pipeline, and the Japanese reader receives ワイン, *wain*, with the juristic debate already settled by an algorithmic accident that no one chose, no one signed, and no one can see. The relay translation, which the twentieth century worked for thirty-seven years to overcome in the name of fidelity, has been resurrected inside the machine with the preface removed.

There is a further mechanism, quieter and larger. The machine learned its renderings from the existing archive of human translations, and the archive has majorities. Whichever rendering of an anchored word was most common in the training data becomes the default of

Chapter 4
Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?

every future crossing, in the prison and in Paradise alike; the minority renderings, and the living scholarly debate among them, flatten into a single confident output. This is where the philosophical vocabulary of our time becomes useful. Fricker has taught us to see epistemic injustice, harm done to people specifically as knowers; what is at stake here is the kind she calls hermeneutical injustice, in which a group's own interpretive resources never enter the shared stock, so that its experience is understood in other people's terms (Fricker 2007). Santos warns of epistemicide, the destruction of subordinated knowledges (Santos 2014). What the machine threatens is a soft, unintended version of both: less the killing of a knowledge tradition than its automatic conversion, at every crossing, into the categories of the dominant archive, performed politely, fluently, and at a vast and growing scale (Bender et al. 2021).

Fairness requires the other column of the ledger, and it is substantial. The machine has democratized access to an extent no reform movement ever achieved: a student in Amman or Fukuoka can now read, after a fashion, anything written anywhere. Scholars of small languages can publish through the machine into English and be read, far more readily than before, beyond their borders; and I will not pretend my own work has not accelerated. The cost is not incurred by any individual user; it is structural. To exist globally is increasingly to pass through the machine, and the machine belongs to no speech community, answers to none, and holds nothing at anchor. It is mediation without membership: the first mediator in the history of the crossing that does not live on either shore.

This is why I keep returning, in this chapter as in the last, to the figure of the researcher who works in several languages. In the old regime such a person was a courier, carrying meaning across. In the new regime the couriers are machines, and the multilingual scholar's function changes: he or she becomes an auditor of crossings, one of the few people positioned to catch "wine" standing where the text said *khamr*, to

notice the hidden pivot, to know that a debate has been flattened because they can still hear the debate. The machine has not made such people redundant. It has made them, for the first time, structurally necessary.

6. Conclusion: Toward a Moral Infrastructure

Let me gather the argument. For most of recorded history, the crossing of meaning between languages was slow, its mediation was visible, and its responsibility was personal: Anjirō's error could be found and reversed, Sakamoto's English sources stood in his preface, Izutsu signed his choices and is argued with still. The machine has abolished the slowness, inverted the visibility, and vacated the responsibility, while raising the volume of crossing beyond anything in human experience. The question "who speaks?" has therefore stopped being rhetorical. It has become a question of governance, and I want to end by saying, as concretely as I can, what an answer would require.

It would require, first, that the mediator be named: text that has passed through a machine should say so, and say which machine, exactly as Sakamoto's preface said Sale, Rodwell, and Palmer. Second, that the route be disclosed: where a system has pivoted through a third language, the reader deserves to know it, for the reader of 1920 knew as much, and it would be strange if the twenty-first century offered less honesty than the preface of the Taishō era. Third, that the corpus be treated as a matter of justice: a language's poverty in data must not be allowed to become its sentence in knowledge, and the building of resources for under-documented languages should be understood as knowledge policy, not charity. Fourth, that anchored words be protected: for scriptural, legal, and other anchored vocabulary, the default should be the strategy that Japanese practice has tested longest, from Deusu to the katakana shelf, namely transliteration with explanation rather

Chapter 4
Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation?

than silent replacement, and no machine rendering of such texts should be treated as authoritative without a responsible human reading. Fifth, that multilingualism be treated as an ethical competence rather than a private convenience: the auditors of the crossing must be trained, valued, and placed where the crossings happen. And these standards have addressees: the international organizations now drafting rules for artificial intelligence, the universities and publishers that certify knowledge, and the platform companies through whose systems the crossings actually pass; the governance of translation has become, in the strict sense, a global question.

Taken together, these five standards are not technical adjustments; they are the first elements of what I would call the moral infrastructure of global knowledge: the shared norms that decide whose words are carried, whose meanings survive the crossing, and who answers for what is said in whose name. Roads and cables move goods and signals; this infrastructure would move meaning, and like all infrastructure it will be built either deliberately or badly. A “new era” of knowledge production, to borrow the language of this volume’s title, will be judged less by the fluency of its machines, which is already beyond complaint, than by whether it can keep persons, and the responsibilities of persons, inside the circuit of understanding.

I began this chapter with a small daily scene: a translated sentence standing on my screen, confident and ownerless, and a question repeating itself in my mind. I can now give my answer. The machine will speak more and more of the world’s sentences, and I will go on using it, gratefully, every working day. But between its voice and the reader, in my own work at least, there will always stand a person who has checked the anchored words against their anchors and is prepared to be blamed. The old translators teach us this above all: someone must continue to sign. In my own work, I intend that someone to be me.

References

- Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj. 1955. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Ed. Muḥammad Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī. Cairo: ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī.
- al-Kāsānī, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Abū Bakr. 1327–28 AH. *Badāʾiʿ al-ṣanāʾiʿ fī tartīb al-sharāʾiʿ*. Cairo.
- al-Sarakhsī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad. 1993. *al-Mabsūṭ*. Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda; repr. Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa.
- Arberry, Arthur J. 1955. *The Koran Interpreted*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Bender, Emily M., Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell. 2021. On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? In *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 610–623.
- Brown, Peter F., John Cocke, Stephen A. Della Pietra, Vincent J. Della Pietra, Fredrick Jelinek, John D. Lafferty, Robert L. Mercer, and Paul S. Roossin. 1990. A Statistical Approach to Machine Translation. *Computational Linguistics*, 16(2), 79–85.
- Burman, Thomas E. 2007. *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Elison, George. 1973. *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fan, Angela, Shruti Bhosale, Holger Schwenk, Zhiyi Ma, Ahmed El-Kishky, Siddharth Goyal, Mandeep Baines, Onur Celebi, Guillaume Wenzek, Vishrav Chaudhary, Naman Goyal, Tom Birch, Vitaliy Liptchinsky, Sergey Edunov, Edouard Grave, Michael Auli, Armand Joulin. 2021. Beyond English-Centric Multilingual Machine Translation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 22(1), 1–48.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of*

- Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hutchins, W. John. 2004. The Georgetown-IBM Experiment Demonstrated in January 1954. In *Machine Translation: From Real Users to Research (AMTA 2004)*. Berlin: Springer, 102–114.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko. 1957–58. *Kōran* [The Koran], 3 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- . 1964. *Kōran* [The Koran], rev. ed., 3 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Johnson, Melvin, Mike Schuster, Quoc V. Le, Maxim Krikun, Yonghui Wu, Zhifeng Chen, Nikhil Thorat, Fernanda Viégas, Martin Wattenberg, Greg Corrado, Macduff Hughes, Jeffrey Dean. 2017. Google’s Multilingual Neural Machine Translation System: Enabling Zero-Shot Translation. *Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 5, 339–351.
- Khashan, Ammar. 2022a. *Isurāmu keizai no genzō: Muhanmado jidai no hōkitei keisei kara gendai no kakushin made* [The original image of Islamic economics: From the formation of legal rulings in the age of Muḥammad to contemporary innovation]. Kyoto: Nakanishiya Shuppan. (in Japanese)
- . 2022b. Ijtihad-based Developments of the Waqf System in Islam and its Re-institutionalization in the Contemporary Context: Historical and Theoretical Reflections. *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, 15, 93–118.
- Kosugi, Yasushi. 2009. “*Kuruān*”: *Katarikakeru Isurāmu* [The Qur’ān: Islam that speaks to us]. Iwanami Shoten (Shomotsu tanjō series). (in Japanese)
- Kozlowski, Gregory C. 1985. *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mita, Ryōichi. 1972. *Nichi-A taiyaku chūkai Sei Kuruān* [The Holy Qur’ān: Japanese–Arabic parallel text with commentary]. Nihon

- Musurimu Kyōkai [Japan Muslim Association]. (in Japanese and Arabic)
- Ōkawa, Reiko. 2004. *Seiten “Kuruān” no shisō: Isurāmu no sekaikan* [The thought of the holy scripture, the Qur’ān: The Islamic worldview]. Kōdansha (Kōdansha Gendai Shinsho). (in Japanese)
- Ōkawa, Shūmei. 1950. *Kōran* [The Koran]. Iwasaki Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. 1930. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. London: Knopf.
- Rodwell, J. M. 1861. *The Koran*. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Sakamoto, Ken’ichi. 1920. *Kōran-kyō* [The Koran scripture]. Sekai Seiten Zenshū Kankōkai. (in Japanese)
- Sale, George. 1734. *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed*. London: C. Ackers.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Vaswani, Ashish, Noam Shazeer, Niki Parmar, Jakob Uszkoreit, Llion Jones, Aidan N. Gomez, Łukasz Kaiser, and Illia Polosukhin. 2017. Attention Is All You Need. In *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, 30.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 2008. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- W3Techs. 2026. Usage Statistics of Content Languages for Websites. (Data as reported June 5, 2026). <https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language>
- Yusuf Ali, Abdullah. 1934. *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Lahore.

Chapter 5

Theorizing from the Global South: From Critique to Reconstruction in Postcolonial Social Theory

Hasan Mahmud

1. Introduction

This chapter develops a constructive approach to postcolonial social theory by shifting the discussion from critiquing Eurocentrism to reconstructing sociological knowledge. Postcolonial scholarship has convincingly exposed the colonial and unequal foundations of theory production, but it has devoted less attention to how new sociological concepts emerge from historically marginalized societies. I argue that postcolonial social theory should retain the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology while broadening the historical and geographical foundations from which the theory is developed. Drawing on my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh, I show how empirical inquiry became conceptual inquiry and how a field site became a theoretical site. Rather than treating the Global South primarily as a source of empirical evidence, I argue that it should also be understood as a source of conceptual innovation. A genuinely global sociology depends on recognizing societies long positioned at the margins of theory production as places from which sociological concepts can also emerge.

Contemporary sociology now draws on an unprecedented range of empirical research from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle

East. As a result, societies that once occupied the margins of disciplinary inquiry have become central to many sociological debates. Yet one imbalance has proven far more resistant to change. While the Global South has become an indispensable source of empirical knowledge, it continues to play a much smaller role in shaping the concepts through which that knowledge is understood. Empirical materials circulate from South to North, while sociological concepts continue to move largely in the opposite direction.

This imbalance matters because theory influences what researchers see, the questions they ask, and the concepts they develop. When theoretical frameworks emerge from a relatively narrow range of historical and institutional contexts, they privilege some experiences while pushing others to the margins. Expanding the geography of empirical research does not, by itself, democratize knowledge production. It also requires a broader range of historical experiences to shape sociological concepts.

Over the past several decades, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has transformed how sociologists think about knowledge production (Bhambra 2014; Chakrabarty 2000; Connell 2007; Go 2016; Mignolo 2011). Rather than treating modern social science as politically neutral or universally applicable, these scholars have traced its development through histories of colonialism, empire, and unequal global power. In doing so, they have shown that theoretical authority is historically produced rather than naturally given. Their work has fundamentally reshaped debates about how academic knowledge is created, circulated, and legitimized.

This achievement, however, leaves another task unfinished. Demonstrating the limits of Eurocentric knowledge does not by itself show how social theory should move forward. Critique is indispensable, but it cannot be the endpoint of intellectual inquiry. The more difficult

challenge is to develop concepts and theoretical perspectives that emerge from societies long positioned at the margins of theory production (Go 2013).

This chapter addresses that question by arguing for a constructive approach to postcolonial social theory. I argue for retaining the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology while broadening the historical and geographical foundations from which theory is produced. A postcolonial social theory, as I understand it, reconstructs social theory by treating the historical experiences of the Global South as sites of conceptual innovation and sources of sociological concepts. The objective is to cultivate a genuinely global sociology in which theory emerges from a wider range of historical experiences.

To develop this argument, I draw on my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh. I present Bangladesh as a theoretical site from which broader sociological concepts emerge. The analysis reconstructs how theoretical insights emerged through the research process itself. The chapter proceeds in four stages. I first revisit major postcolonial critiques of knowledge production, focusing on the contributions of Raewyn Connell, Syed Farid Alatas, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. I then turn to Julian Go's call for a postcolonial social theory and develop it into a broader argument for theorizing from the Global South. Finally, I reconstruct how theoretical insights emerged through my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh and consider what this process suggests for the future of social theory.

2. From Critique to Reconstruction: Toward a Postcolonial Social Theory

The uneven geography of theory production is rooted in the historical formation of the modern social sciences and the unequal global relations

through which academic knowledge has been produced, circulated, and legitimized (Alatas 2003; Connell 2007). This history helps account for why some societies have come to be seen primarily as producers of concepts and theoretical knowledge. In contrast, others have been treated mainly as suppliers of empirical material. One question is why the Global South remains underrepresented in theoretical debates. An equally important question is how the present organization of knowledge came to assign different intellectual roles to different parts of the world.

Over the past several decades, the assumption that modern social science represents a universal and politically neutral body of knowledge has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Postcolonial scholars have shown that the production of social theory has been deeply intertwined with colonialism, empire, and global inequalities of power. Although Raewyn Connell, Syed Farid Alatas, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos approach this history from different directions, they share a common concern with how unequal relations of power have shaped the organization of sociological knowledge. Their work provides the point of departure for the argument developed in this chapter.

(1) Raewyn Connell and the Global Division of Intellectual Labor

Raewyn Connell's work provides one of the most influential accounts of why social theory remains so unevenly distributed across the world. She argues that this pattern cannot be understood apart from the histories of colonialism and the global expansion of modernity (Connell 2007). Sociology, in her account, developed through a global division of intellectual labor in which metropolitan centers became recognized as producers of theory, while societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America were positioned primarily as sources of empirical knowledge. The unequal geography of theory is therefore not an intellectual accident but

the outcome of broader historical relations of power.

Connell's critique extends beyond where theory is produced to the authority it claims. She questions the assumption that concepts developed in Europe and North America possess universal explanatory power. Their authority, she argues, was established through a combination of intellectual achievement, imperial expansion, colonial administration, and the institutional consolidation of Western academia. The result was not simply the spread of particular theories, but the concentration of theoretical authority in metropolitan centers and the relegation of knowledge produced elsewhere to an empirical role.

Connell's intervention also changes how empirical research is understood. If the Global South continues to function primarily as a source of evidence through which concepts developed elsewhere are tested or refined, unequal knowledge production will persist regardless of how much new research is conducted. More fieldwork alone cannot democratize sociology if the direction of conceptual innovation remains unchanged. Her work therefore invites us to reconsider not only where research is conducted but also where theory is expected to originate. At the same time, it leaves unresolved the central question of this chapter: how might that unequal geography of theory actually be transformed?

(2) Syed Farid Alatas and Intellectual Dependency

Across much of the postcolonial academy, scholars work with concepts that were developed elsewhere. For Alatas, this is not simply a matter of intellectual preference but the outcome of a long-standing academic culture. Research agendas, university curricula, publication systems, and professional recognition continue to reward theoretical consumption more consistently than theoretical innovation. As a result, scholars become highly proficient at applying established concepts while having

far fewer opportunities to reshape them or develop alternatives. Alatas describes this condition as intellectual dependency (Alatas 2003, 2006).

One of Alatas's most important contributions is to show that a more diverse sociology does not automatically produce more diverse sociological theory. Representation alone changes very little if research continues to be organized around concepts and questions developed elsewhere. Intellectual autonomy requires more than geographical inclusion (Alatas 2006). It requires the capacity to define research problems, develop concepts, and engage with social realities on their own analytical terms. In this way, Alatas extends Connell's structural argument by showing how the global division of intellectual labor is reproduced through everyday academic practices.

His work also points to another question. If intellectual dependency is to be overcome, what kind of knowledge should autonomous scholarship produce? Is it enough to develop alternative theories within existing disciplinary frameworks? Or does the task require rethinking the epistemological foundations of social science itself? These questions lead directly to the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

(3) Boaventura de Sousa Santos and the Politics of Knowledge

Modern social science has never treated all forms of knowledge equally. Some ways of knowing have been incorporated into disciplinary sociology as legitimate sources of theory, while others have been dismissed as belief, tradition, or culture. It is this hierarchy of epistemic legitimacy that concerns Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos 2014). Rather than asking who produces knowledge, he asks why certain forms of knowledge are recognized as authoritative while others remain outside the boundaries of legitimate social science.

Colonial expansion did more than spread European forms of

knowledge. It also changed which intellectual traditions came to count as legitimate sources of social theory. Many traditions survived, but they increasingly appeared within academic scholarship as religion, folklore, or culture rather than as bodies of knowledge capable of generating sociological concepts. De Sousa Santos argues that this hierarchy was historically produced rather than intellectually inevitable. He describes this process of systematic devaluation as *epistemicide* (Santos 2018).

This argument extends the critiques developed by Connell and Alatas. If modern social science recognizes only a limited range of intellectual traditions as capable of producing theory, increasing geographical diversity alone will not change the hierarchy of knowledge. The challenge is to create conditions in which different intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and ways of reasoning can contribute to social theory. De Sousa Santos describes this possibility through his idea of an ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014). It calls for dialogue among different forms of knowledge without assuming that one tradition possesses universal epistemological authority.

Taken together, these three scholars illuminate different dimensions of unequal knowledge production. Connell traces its historical formation. Alatas shows how it is reproduced through everyday academic practice. De Sousa Santos shifts attention to its epistemological foundations. Together, they explain why social theory has become geographically concentrated. They also leave open the question that motivates this chapter: once those inequalities have been identified, how should sociology move beyond critique toward reconstruction?

(4) From Diagnosis to Reconstruction

Taken together, these discussions point toward a shared conclusion. Modern social science did not develop on historically neutral ground.

Its concepts, institutions, and intellectual authority emerged through colonial encounters, global inequalities, and uneven historical relationships. Recognizing that history changes how we understand sociology itself.

At the same time, exposing those inequalities does not tell us how social theory should move forward. Much postcolonial scholarship has concentrated on explaining how existing hierarchies of knowledge came into being. The equally important task is to ask how sociology can be reconstructed once those hierarchies have been identified. Critique reveals the limits of inherited frameworks. Reconstruction asks what new concepts and theoretical traditions might emerge beyond those limits.

Once critique has exposed the historical limits of modern social science, another question inevitably follows (Go 2013, 2016). What should sociology look like after the postcolonial critique? How can it be reconstructed rather than simply criticized? Julian Go places these questions at the center of his work. Rather than treating postcolonial sociology primarily as a critical project, he asks how sociology itself might be reimagined on broader historical and intellectual foundations.

3. From Critique to Reconstruction: Toward a Postcolonial Social Theory

(1) Julian Go and the Turn toward Reconstruction

The postcolonial critique has fundamentally changed how sociology understands the politics of knowledge production. Yet the work of critique leaves an obvious question unresolved. Once the historical, institutional, and epistemological limits of metropolitan social theory have been identified, where does sociology go from there? What does

reconstruction actually require? These are the questions that organize Julian Go's intervention (Go 2013, 2016).

Reconstruction requires more than expanding the geographical range of sociological research. It also requires rethinking the historical foundations from which theory is produced. Julian Go (2016) argues that postcolonial sociology should become a constructive intellectual project capable of reshaping the discipline itself. His concern is not simply to criticize sociology but to rebuild it on broader intellectual foundations.

Go's contribution is important because he rejects a simple choice between preserving disciplinary sociology unchanged and abandoning it altogether. Extending existing theories to new empirical settings leaves the unequal geography of theory production largely untouched. Rejecting sociology altogether means giving up analytical tools that still help us understand social life. Go points to another possibility. Sociology can be reconstructed from within by broadening the historical experiences, intellectual traditions, and empirical realities that contribute to theory.

Go provides the bridge between postcolonial critique and theoretical reconstruction. His work also opens another line of inquiry. If reconstruction is the next task of postcolonial sociology, what should guide that process? How can scholars develop concepts from historically marginalized societies without replacing one intellectual orthodoxy with another? These are the questions that shape the rest of this chapter.

Recent scholarship suggests that this movement toward reconstruction is already underway. Tarumoto's (2023) discussion of immigration in Japan provides one example. Revisiting the concept of super-diversity, he argues that the Japanese experience is better understood through the concept of *medium-diversity*, which emerged from the Japanese case. Chang and Choi's (2025) study of Vietnamese

marriage migration to Taiwan and South Korea provides another. Drawing on life-history interviews with Vietnamese marriage migrants, they develop the concepts of *marriage channels* and *temporal inequality* to explain how different migration pathways shape women's opportunities to exercise agency before migration. Similar efforts can also be found in Comaroff and Comaroff's (2015) work on theory from the South.

(2) Reconstructing Social Theory

The discussion so far points toward a different way of thinking about where social theory comes from. Expanding the range of voices is important, but it does not by itself change the sources from which sociological concepts emerge. If postcolonial scholarship has shown that modern social science developed through unequal relations of power, the next challenge is to ask what happens when historically marginalized societies become places from which concepts themselves are developed.

I am not suggesting that sociology abandons its existing analytical traditions. The task is to broaden the historical and geographical foundations from which sociological concepts are developed. For much of its history, sociology has treated concepts produced in Europe and North America as the natural starting point for understanding societies elsewhere. A postcolonial social theory asks what new concepts become possible once that direction of theorizing is no longer taken for granted.

This position also avoids a false choice that often appears in debates on decolonizing knowledge. One position assumes that existing theories possess universal explanatory power and need to be applied more widely—the other risks fragmenting sociology into disconnected bodies of local knowledge (Bhambra 2014). I suggest a different approach.

Social theory should be understood as an open intellectual project. Its concepts are continually revised, challenged, and expanded through engagement with diverse historical experiences.

Colonialism, migration, postcolonial state formation, religious pluralism, and informal economies have usually entered sociology as empirical subjects. They are studied because they expand what we know about particular societies. But they can do something else as well. They can unsettle inherited concepts and open new directions for sociological thinking. Seen from this angle, the Global South is more than a geographical category. It becomes a vast archive of historical experience from which sociological concepts themselves can emerge. The question, then, is not only whether theory travels. It is whether concepts can also travel outward from these histories and reshape broader sociological debates (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015).

The shift begins in the research process itself. Empirical inquiry is no longer limited to testing existing concepts; it also becomes a way of generating new ones. Field sites therefore become more than locations where evidence is gathered. They become places where concepts are questioned, refined, and sometimes transformed through sustained engagement with particular social worlds.

Seen in this way, empirical research is asked a different question. Instead of treating societies primarily as cases through which existing theories are tested, researchers ask what concepts emerging from those societies might contribute to sociology more broadly. The objective is a genuinely global sociology in which theoretical authority is continually reshaped through dialogue among different historical experiences.

(3) From Theoretical Argument to Theoretical Practice

Up to this point, the discussion has remained at the level of argument.

The more difficult task is to see what reconstruction actually looks like in the course of research. Saying that historically marginalized societies can become sites of theoretical innovation is only a beginning. The stronger claim is that concepts can emerge through the ordinary work of empirical inquiry itself. The discussion that follows examines how that happened in my own research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh.

My own research did not begin by looking for new concepts. It began with historical questions that existing concepts could not fully answer. Those moments of friction gradually changed the direction of the inquiry. Instead of treating them as problems to be resolved, I came to see them as opportunities to reconsider the categories I had inherited. Theory, in this sense, did not precede empirical research. It emerged through sustained engagement with the historical materials themselves (Bourdieu 2004).

Nothing in this argument can be established in the abstract. It has to emerge through the movement of research itself. My own work on Bengali Muslim identity began as an attempt to understand a particular historical formation. It gradually became something else as the questions raised by that history exceeded the concepts I had brought to it. The discussion that follows reconstructs that movement.

4. Theorizing from Bangladesh

The argument developed so far grew out of a research project that began with a much narrower ambition. I set out to understand the historical formation of Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh, not to rethink how postcolonial social theory might be constructed. That broader argument emerged only gradually as the research unfolded. The following section reconstructs how that shift took place.

(1) Bangladesh as a Theoretical Site

The project began with a question about Bengali Muslim identity rather than with an ambition to develop postcolonial social theory (Mahmud 2022). I wanted to understand how a Muslim majority population that experienced colonialism, Partition, and the creation of an independent nation had continued to negotiate questions of history, religion, and collective identity. As the research progressed, those historical questions began to unsettle some of the conceptual assumptions I had initially taken for granted. My research on Bengali Muslim identity did not begin with these questions. It began as a historical study of the formation of Bengali Muslim identity. Like many studies of identity, I wanted to understand a particular society through its history, historiography, and competing interpretations. At that stage, Bangladesh appeared as an empirical setting that required explanation. I had not yet begun to think of it as a source of sociological concepts.

The historical materials did not point toward a single or stable understanding of Bengali Muslim identity. Instead, they revealed a series of political and intellectual struggles over how that identity should be understood at different moments. Colonial rule, the Partition of India, the Pakistan period, and the emergence of Bangladesh each reorganized the relationship between religion, language, and national belonging in different ways (Ahmed 1981; Bose 1986; Chatterji 1994). As these historical layers accumulated, it became increasingly difficult to explain Bengali Muslim identity through any single conceptual framework.

As I worked through these historical materials, one pattern became increasingly difficult to ignore. Political change repeatedly altered the language through which Bengali Muslims understood themselves, yet none of those shifts completely displaced what had come before.

New political projects accumulated upon earlier histories rather than replacing them. What initially appeared to be a succession of historical periods gradually revealed itself as an ongoing negotiation over identity, memory, and belonging.

It was at this point that I began to question whether existing concepts adequately captured what I was observing. The issue was not simply that Bengali Muslim identity had changed over time. Rather, the historical materials suggested that continuity and transformation were unfolding simultaneously. That tension eventually led me to develop a different way of thinking about identity formation.

The shift did not happen all at once. It emerged through repeated encounters with historical materials that resisted the categories I had initially relied upon. Each time I thought a familiar concept was sufficient, another episode complicated that interpretation. Rather than producing a single explanatory framework, the research gradually redirected my attention toward the historical conditions through which Bengali Muslim identity was continually being reworked.

Gradually, it became increasingly difficult to describe these historical processes with the conceptual vocabulary I had inherited. The problem was not simply that the existing concepts were incomplete. They directed attention toward some dimensions of the historical record while leaving others largely invisible. The concept developed in this study emerged from that dissatisfaction rather than from an attempt to replace one theory with another.

Looking back, this was also the moment when Bangladesh became more than an empirical field site. It had become a place from which new sociological concepts could emerge. In this sense, Bangladesh became a theoretical site. More broadly, a field site becomes a theoretical site when empirical inquiry begins to revise inherited concepts.

(2) Challenging Inherited Narratives

The turning point in the project did not come from discovering new archival materials or previously unknown historical evidence. It came while reading the historiography on Bengali Muslim identity. I began in a fairly conventional way. I aimed to determine which interpretation offered the most convincing account of the historical emergence of Bengali Muslims. Richard Eaton (1993) emphasized the relationship between Islamization and agrarian expansion in eastern Bengal. Asim Roy (1983) focused on the accommodation between Islamic and Bengali cultural traditions. Other scholars, writing from nationalist, religious, or postcolonial perspectives, offered different explanations. My initial task was to decide which account was most convincing.

Reading these historians one after another, I expected their disagreements to produce very different ways of understanding Bengali Muslim identity. They certainly disagreed about chronology, historical causation, and the significance of particular events. Yet I kept running into the same language. Whether the discussion centered on Islamization, nationalism, colonialism, or culture, familiar oppositions resurfaced—Bengali and Muslim, religion and language, indigenous and foreign, syncretism and orthodoxy. I began marking these recurring terms in the margins of my notes long before I understood why they mattered. Only later did I realize that the categories themselves had remained remarkably stable even as historians argued intensely over their historical interpretations (Ahmed 1981; Chatterji 1994).

Recognizing this pattern changed the direction of the project. The more I read, the less interested I became in deciding which interpretation was historically correct. Instead, I found myself returning to the categories themselves. I wanted to understand why they continued to organize the historiography despite profound disagreements over

historical interpretation. Without quite realizing it, I had begun reading the historiography differently. My attention gradually shifted from explaining Bengali Muslim identity to examining the conceptual vocabulary through which that history had been written.

Once my questions changed, I found myself reading the literature differently. I was no longer treating historiographical works simply as sources of historical interpretation. They had become part of the historical record themselves. Reading colonial scholarship alongside nationalist and postcolonial histories, I became increasingly interested in the categories that traveled across these different traditions. Their conclusions often diverged, but their assumptions about identity, religion, nation, and culture proved surprisingly resilient. The literature itself had become evidence—not only about Bengali Muslims, but also about the historical production of sociological categories.

One recurring debate illustrates this shift. Much of the historiography has been organized around the question of whether Bengali Muslims were fundamentally Bengali or fundamentally Muslim. Different scholars answered that question in different ways, but almost all accepted its underlying premise—that “Bengali” and “Muslim” referred to separate identities whose historical relationship required explanation. As I returned to the historical record, I found this opposition increasingly difficult to sustain. The communities I encountered did not move between two separate identities. Their linguistic, religious, regional, and political affiliations developed together through intertwined historical processes. The binary seemed to organize the historiography more effectively than it explained the historical evidence.

I did not arrive at these questions by deciding to become more theoretical. They emerged because the historical explanations I was reading increasingly left another problem untouched. I could compare interpretations of Bengali Muslim identity, but I still could

not explain why those interpretations relied on the same conceptual vocabulary. At that point, my research was no longer concerned only with reconstructing the past. It had begun to investigate the categories through which that past had been made intelligible. Looking back, that was the moment when a historical study gradually became an exercise in theorizing from the Global South.

(3) Reconstructing Categories: Identity, Religion, and Nation

Changing the question also changed the way I read the historical record. I was no longer looking only for evidence that supported one interpretation of Bengali Muslim identity over another. Instead, I became increasingly interested in the categories that made those interpretations possible in the first place. The more I worked through the literature and the historical materials together, the more difficult it became to treat those categories as neutral analytical tools. They, too, had histories that required explanation.

The first category I reconsidered was identity itself. Much of the historiography treated Bengali Muslim identity as something waiting to be recovered from the historical record. Scholars disagreed over whether language, religion, ethnicity, or regional culture formed its defining feature. Yet they generally shared one assumption. It was treated as a relatively stable entity. As I read the historiography more closely, I found that assumption increasingly difficult to maintain.

One of the first things that struck me was how differently religious affiliation functioned across the historical record. In some periods, particularly with agrarian expansion and the spread of Islamic institutions, it became increasingly prominent in public life. Yet that prominence did not remain constant. Later debates shifted toward language, regional politics, and nationalism, each reorganizing how

Bengali Muslims understood themselves. Reading across these different moments, I found it difficult to treat religious or linguistic identity as permanent historical categories.

The question returned in a different form when I turned to discussions of religion and nation. Much of the historiography treated Bengali linguistic identity and Muslim religious identity as competing loyalties, asking which ultimately mattered more (Ahmed 1981; Eaton 1993; Roy 1983). Yet that question became increasingly difficult to sustain as I worked through the historical materials. The people I encountered did not appear to move back and forth between two separate identities. Their religious, linguistic, regional, and political affiliations unfolded together through the same historical processes. Gradually, I became less interested in deciding whether people were primarily Bengali or primarily Muslim. I began asking why the historiography had assumed that these identities needed to be separated in the first place.

Only gradually did I realize that I was no longer trying to produce another interpretation of Bengali Muslim identity. The more I worked through the historical materials, the less satisfied I became with the conceptual framework that had organized so much of the historiography. Instead of treating categories such as identity, religion, nation, and language as neutral analytical tools, I began asking how they had acquired that status in the first place. They, too, had histories, shaped by particular political projects, intellectual traditions, and historical experiences. My attention was no longer directed only toward the writing of history, but also toward the concepts through which that history had been written.

The theoretical contribution of the project emerged from this change in perspective. Bangladesh became conceptually productive because sustained engagement with its history exposed the limits of inherited

concepts and made their reconstruction necessary. These concepts emerged through dialogue with a historical experience that has long remained at the margins of theory production.

For me, this is what it means to theorize from the Global South. The value of historically marginalized experiences lies not simply in adding new empirical cases to sociology, but in creating occasions to question concepts that have long been taken for granted. My own work on Bangladesh convinced me that careful historical inquiry can become one way of rethinking those concepts.

(4) From Bangladesh to Social Theory

Looking back, I came to think differently about the relationship between empirical research and conceptual development. The theoretical contribution of the project did not arise from applying an existing framework to Bangladesh. It emerged through sustained engagement with a historical experience that gradually exposed the limits of the analytical categories I had inherited. What changed in the process was not only my understanding of Bangladesh, but also the concepts through which I had initially approached it.

This experience also changed the way I think about empirical research more generally. Much sociological research begins with established concepts and asks how well they illuminate a particular case. That tradition has produced an enormous body of valuable scholarship, and my own project began in much the same way. Over time, however, I became more aware of one of its limitations. Concepts usually travel to field sites, while field sites are expected to supply evidence (Connell 2007). As a result, theoretical authority tends to remain where concepts originate rather than where empirical encounters begin to reshape them.

My research on Bangladesh followed a different path. Existing

concepts did not disappear when the project began. They provided the language through which I first approached the historical materials. As the research progressed, those concepts became increasingly difficult to sustain. The archival and historiographical materials repeatedly exceeded the categories I had inherited from the literature. I came to see this as an invitation to rethink the concepts themselves. Theory emerged through an ongoing dialogue between inherited concepts and the resistance of the historical record (Go 2016).

Working through the history of Bengali Muslim identity also changed the way I came to think about comparison. I found it increasingly difficult to assume that concepts remained stable while only historical cases varied. Different societies are usually compared through categories whose meanings are treated as self-evident. My own research suggested another possibility. Historical comparison can also reveal the limits of those categories and invite us to reconsider them. Comparison, in this sense, becomes more than a way of identifying similarities and differences between societies. It also becomes a process through which sociological concepts themselves are revised and refined.

The agenda outlined above reflects the path I have taken over time. I began with a Weberian approach to remittances, focusing on migrants' motivations (Mahmud 2014), and subsequently to a Durkheimian interpretive approach (Mahmud 2017) and then a realist approach (2020). That framework soon felt insufficient. It could not fully account for what I was observing in the field. This pushed me to shift the question. Instead of asking why migrants remit, I began to ask what remitting does. From there, I developed the idea of *remittance as belonging* (Mahmud 2024). What started as an empirical puzzle gradually became a conceptual intervention grounded in migrant practices.

I now see this trajectory differently. It is not simply a change in topic or framework. It shows how concepts can emerge from sustained

engagement with migrant lives. In that sense, my own work speaks to broader calls to rethink how sociological concepts are produced and where theory is located (Connell 1997; Seidman 1991). This perspective also shapes the present chapter, where migrant practices are treated not only as empirical material but as sites of conceptual work.

The argument developed here grows out of a longer research trajectory in which empirical work repeatedly unsettled the concepts I began with. Early research on marginalized actors showed how established categories failed to capture lived social realities (Mahmud 2008). A similar difficulty appeared in work on migration intermediaries, where terms such as “broker” or “exploiter” could not account for the relational character of migration processes (Mahmud 2014). Later research on remittances raised related questions. Migrants described remitting in terms of obligation, care, and responsibility, which did not fit prevailing economic models (Mahmud 2014; 2017; 2020). The new concept of remittance emerged from this tension (Mahmud 2024). Across these studies, the field did more than provide evidence. It required concepts to change. This process culminates in the formulation of *remittance as belonging*, which reconceptualizes remittances not as economic transfers but as practices through which migrants sustain social ties, moral obligations, and a sense of home. This illustrates a cumulative process in which sustained empirical engagement progressively reveals the limits of existing concepts and enables their transformation.

The contribution of the Global South extends well beyond diversifying empirical research. Colonialism, migration, religious pluralism, postcolonial state formation, and frontier societies are sources of conceptual innovation. The Global South expands the historical experiences through which sociological concepts are developed, questioned, and revised.

This is what I mean by theorizing from the Global South. It represents another way of doing sociology. Empirical research becomes more than the application of inherited analytical categories. It becomes a way of questioning and reconstructing them. Bangladesh shows how a society long treated as an object of theory can also become a place from which theory emerges. The movement from studying Bangladesh to theorizing from Bangladesh is more than a change in research strategy. It is a different way of thinking about where sociological concepts come from and how a genuinely global social theory can be built.

5. Conclusion

Writing this chapter has reinforced for me a problem that extends well beyond postcolonial sociology. Contemporary sociology now draws upon an increasingly global range of empirical research, yet the production of sociological concepts remains concentrated within a relatively small number of intellectual centers in the Global North. Postcolonial scholarship has done much to reveal how this imbalance emerged through colonial histories, institutional arrangements, and unequal epistemic authority (Connell 2007; Go 2016). The question that stayed with me throughout this chapter, however, was what comes after that critique. My answer has been that the next task is reconstruction.

I have argued that reconstruction expands the historical experiences from which sociological concepts emerge while retaining the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology. It requires expanding the historical experiences from which sociological concepts would be constructed. A postcolonial social theory is a different way of thinking about knowledge production. It asks researchers to approach empirical inquiry as a source of conceptual development. The challenge is to diversify the sources from which sociology develops its concepts.

The discussion of Bengali Muslim identity shows how theoretical reconstruction is possible through one research process. My argument is that sustained engagement with one historical setting can expose the limits of inherited concepts and contribute to their reconstruction. Bangladesh contributes to sociology through engagement with its history. That engagement reconstructs sociological concepts and shows how a field site can become a theoretical site.

The implications go beyond Bangladesh and the Global South. They invite sociologists to reconsider the relationship between empirical research and theory. Fieldwork does more than provide evidence through which existing concepts are tested or refined. It can become a place where those concepts are questioned and reconstructed. Theory becomes stronger through continued engagement with diverse social and historical worlds. This is what a postcolonial social theory makes possible.

The future of postcolonial social theory depends on developing new practices of theorizing. The question is no longer whether social theory can travel to the Global South. It has done so for generations. The more important question is whether the Global South can increasingly become a place from which social theory also travels. The geography of sociology will change as historically marginalized societies become recognized as places where sociological concepts emerge (Bhambra 2014). That, I believe, is the promise of a postcolonial social theory.

References

- Ahmed, R. 1981. *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity*. Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alatas, S. F. 2003. Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology*, 51(6), 599–613.

- . 2006. *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism*. New Delhi; Thousand Oaks; London: SAGE.
- Bhambra, G. K. 2007. *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2014. *Connected Sociologies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bose, S. 1986. *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 2004. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chang, H. C. and S. Y. P., Choi. 2025. Marriage Channels, Temporal Inequality, and Migration Decision-Making Agency: Vietnamese Marriage Migrants in Asia. *International Migration Review*, 59(4), 1950–1974.
- Chatterji, J. 1994. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Comaroff, J. and J. L. Comaroff. 2015. *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Connell, R. 1997. Why is Classical Theory Classical? *American Journal of Sociology*, 102(6), 1511–1557.
- . 2007. *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Eaton, R. M. 1993. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Go, J. 2013. For a Postcolonial Sociology. *Theory and Society*, 42(1), 25–55.

- . 2016. *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mahmud, H., 2008. Drug Addiction and Identity Politics: The Spiritual Use of Ganja in Bangladesh. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 11(4), 441–458.
- . 2014. “It’s My Money”: Social Class and the Perception of Remittance among Bangladeshi Migrants in Japan. *Current Sociology*, 62(3), 418–430.
- . 2017. Social Determinants of Remitting Practices Among Bangladeshi Migrants in Japan. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(1), 95–112.
- . 2020. From Individual Motivations to Social Determinants: Towards a Sociology of Migrants’ Remittances. *International Social Science Journal*, 70(237-238), 175–188.
- . 2022. *Bangali Musoloman Proshno* [The Bengali Muslim Question]. SwareO Publisher. (in Bengali)
- . 2024. *Remittance as Belonging: Global Migration, Transnationalism and the Quest for Home*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Mignolo, W., 2011. Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(2).
- Roy, A. 1983. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Santos, B. de S. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- . 2018. *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham Duke University Press.
- Seidman, S. 1991. The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope. *Sociological Theory*, 9(2), 131–146.

- Tarumoto, H. 2023. Considering Super-Diversity in Immigration: Post-Western Sociology and the Japanese Case. In L. Roulleau-Berger, P. Li, S. K. Kim, and S. Yazawa (eds.), *Handbook of Post-Western Sociology: From East Asia to Europe*. Leiden: Brill, 664–675.

Chapter 6

From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity: Relationality in Japanese Thought from Nishida Kitarō to Nakamura Yūjirō

Nobuyuki Matsui

1. Introduction

This chapter draws on the author's extensive research in philosophy, especially Japanese philosophy. In modern Western philosophy, subjectivity is linked to an actor who can think autonomously and act based on free will and self-determination. At first glance, the theme of the subject in philosophy does not seem to be related to a grammatical subject. However, it is. Language expressions require context and situations for speakers, also known as locutionary actors, and language should not be reduced to a mere instrument used to depict the condition of an external entity and communicate its significance to others. As we use language, we become involved in the world around us, and no subject using language exists in complete detachment from the world. While this line of thought connects to the linguistic relativity proposed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it does not imply that the use of a specific language completely confines speakers within its linguistic worldview.¹

The question is whether or not the concept of subjectivity and the

1 In addition, the notion of the “subject” explored in the philosophical inquiry below does not intersect with Chomsky's generative grammar or Pinker's theory of the language instinct, which oppose linguistic relativism.

subject in the grammatical sense become unnecessary in a world where entities are so interlinked. Although this question may sound strange at first, it is one of the central questions in the history of Japanese philosophy which will be discussed in this chapter. For Japanese philosophy to be defined, it is first necessary to identify the ambiguous position of the subject in Japanese grammar, which is the distinctive issue of when thinking of something as a Japanese.

To overview this issue, this chapter first examines skepticism regarding the status of the subject in Japanese, alongside its relation to the concept of the subject as a philosophical theme. In doing so, we will explore the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, who established a unique Japanese philosophy while studying Western philosophy imported during the early modern era. Finally, we will reference the philosophy of Nakamura Yūjirō, who reinterpreted Nishida's philosophy after the defeat of the Asia-Pacific War, especially during the 1980s. Through this approach, this study aims to clarify that subjectivity in Japan represents an intentionality that redefines the "self" within relational contexts.

By way of introduction, the arguments in this chapter are not meant to conclusively settle the academic debate on the Japanese language and subjectivity. Rather, this chapter is intended primarily to explain the significance of thinking in Japanese to a non-specialist audience, drawing on the perspective of Japanese philosophy, which is author's area of specialization.

It is often noted that, compared to Western languages in which the explicit specification of the subject is indispensable, the grammatical function of the subject in Japanese is much less clear. Based on this characteristic, a widely accepted view assumes that Japanese lacks the explicit function of the subject found in Western languages, and that this absence derives from the traditional Japanese nature.

However, even if this is partly the case, the open nature of the

Japanese language toward the ellipsis of the grammatical subject must be kept distinct from any supposed lack of inclination toward subjectivity in Japanese thought. In a word, when I say that “I think” in Japanese, the thinking “I” does not vanish.

In this chapter, I would like to propose the following framework regarding this point: namely, while in the typically understood logic of subject-oriented Western languages, the “subject” thinks, in thinking through Japanese, priority is given to the idea that the subject emerges from the act of thinking itself. Furthermore, thinking is something that is driven precisely *within* relationships.

2. Does Japanese Lack a Clear Grammatical Subject?

First, let us address a common view of the Japanese language. Many think Japanese lacks a clear grammatical subject. However, according to textbook examples of Japanese grammar, a grammatical subject exists. Originally, the introduction of the nominative case in Japanese involved applying a model of linguistics based on Western languages, which had been established from the Meiji period onward. In response to this hasty adoption of Western grammatical models, the linguist Kanaya Takehiro emphasizes that Japanese not only routinely omits the subject in a way that differs from Western languages but is in fact a language that cannot possess a subject in the first place. He says that

[t]he “subject,” which is unnecessary in Japanese and other East Asian languages, was introduced following the Meiji Restoration under the slogan of “Leaving Asia, Joining Europe” (*Datsu-A Nyū-Ō* 脱亜入欧), imitating English grammar. (Kanaya 2019, 15).

Setting aside the question of the validity of Kanaya’s understanding

of Japanese as an anti-subject language, it is obvious that the relationship between the subject and the predicate in Japanese does not always explicitly take the form of logical structures like S-P (subject–predicate) or syntactic patterns like SVO (subject-verb-object), as seen in Western languages.

Now, we will explore this topic from two key dimensions: (1) the contrasting functions of the particles *wa* は and *ga* が, and (2) nested structures of expression. While the centrality of the “predicate” (*jutsugo* 述語) deserves thorough attention as a foundational pillar in analyzing the Japanese language, we will examine it in the next section through the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō.

First, regarding the particles *wa* and *ga*, when interpreted grammatically, the particle *wa* is often considered to take the function of indicating the nominative case. However, from the perspective of Japanese pragmatics, this is not accurate. To be sure, Japanese allows for two distinct expressions, as in “*Watashi WA Matsui desu*” and “*Watashi GA Matsui desu*” (both indicating “I am Matsui”).

According to school grammar textbooks, words marked by *wa* or *ga* are considered the subject. However, many examples show that this is not always the case. To take a famous example in Japanese linguistics, if someone in a restaurant were to ask, “*Nani ga tabetai?*” (何が食べたい?; What do you want to eat?), one might answer, “*Watashi wa sakana*” (私は魚 / “As for me, fish”).

Needless to say, “*Watashi wa sakana*” does not mean “I am a fish.” Notably, the subject-predicate relationship in this sentence is not explicitly expressed, making it impossible to determine a subject. This ambiguity has sparked long-standing debates regarding what constitutes the subject here. Scholars have argued that such an apparently unspecified structure corresponds to an implicit subject-predicate relationship that can be rendered more explicitly as “*Watashi wa sakana*

wo tabetai” (私は魚を食べたい; “I want to eat fish”) or “*Watashi ga tabetai mono wa sakana da*” (私が食べたいものは魚だ; “What I want to eat is fish”).

Kobayashi (2015) examined the nature of unique philosophical thought in Japan from the perspective of the Japanese language. According to his analysis, while sentences described using *wa* and those using *ga* differ, *ga* alone functions as a marker for the subject in Western grammar, even if the two are not entirely equivalent. As Richings (2025) discusses with reference to Kobayashi’s work, *wa* is used “adverbially.” That is, “the subject is usually marked by the particle *ga*, while *wa* is used adverbially, akin to European grammar, and therefore not related to the nominative case” (Richings 2025, 5). Grammatically speaking, *wa* is classified as a binding particle (*kakari joshi* 係助詞) rather than a case particle. This indicates that while *ga* marks the subject in expression, *wa* spotlights the predicate that follows.

Next, regarding the second dimension, the nested structure of expression of Japanese, this was already discussed during the war by the linguist Tokieda Motoki (1900–1967) in his *Kokugo-gaku genron* (Principles of Japanese Linguistics, 1941). Tokieda authored it while serving as a professor at Keijo Imperial University in Japanese-colonized Korea. In this regard, as Yasuda (1997) argues, it is necessary to take into consideration the issue that his view of the national language (*kokugo*) envisaged its dissemination to Korea based on structural similarities with Japanese grammar.

Tokieda advocated the superiority of Japanese (*kokugo*) over “dialectal languages,” such as Korean, and provided a theoretical backbone for imperialistic linguistic unification within the *Kōminka* (皇民化 imperialization) policies, namely, the prohibition of Korean language education and its usage (Kitamura 1987). According to Yasuda, Tokieda’s linguistic theory conceptually distinguishes between

kokugo (national language) and *Nihongo* (Japanese language): *kokugo* is backed by the ideal of establishing a single mother tongue anchored in an integrated state, whereas *Nihongo* refers to the language as actually used in diverse forms in mundane spheres in Japan. However, Tokieda never fully or strictly maintained this distinction; in that sense, *kokugo* and *Nihongo* overlapped, thereby providing a rationale for the discourse asserting the supremacy of the national language in the colonies (Yasuda 1997, 124–126).

Keeping the above issue in mind, let us consider the nested expressive structure that Tokieda identified as a defining feature of Japanese as a national language. As Tokieda argues, “the structure of the national language can by no means be understood in the same way as Indo-European languages, which unify the opposition between subject and predicate in the form of S–P” (Tokieda 2007 [II], 15). Written with three script systems, kanji, hiragana, and katakana, Japanese is categorized as an agglutinative language. Within this system, kanji and hiragana play the primary roles in linguistic expression. Briefly put, while kanji present concepts, hiragana primarily function to link these concepts together. In the schema of Tokieda’s linguistics, these correspond to *shi* 詞 (kanji—representing concepts) and *ji* 辞 (hiragana—joining multiple *shi*).

When Tokieda speaks of the nested structure, he refers to the structural characteristic of Japanese linguistic expression formed by the multi-layered overlapping of these elements and functions. Consider one example he provides: “*Nioi no takai hana ga saita*” (匂の高い花が咲いた), which translates into English as “a fragrant flower has bloomed.” In these English and Japanese sentences, there appears to be no significant difference in word order between Japanese and English. However, it goes without saying that the Japanese expression fundamentally differs from the English in that *shi* and *ji* are arranged alternately. According to

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

Tokieda, the key feature lies in the way *ji* envelop *shi*, forming a unified expression. That is, in the sentence “*Nioi no takai hana ga saita*,” the hiragana “*no*,” “*ga*,” and “*ta*” that follow the kanji bestow semantic unity upon the preceding *shi* while bridging them to the subsequent text.

Note that the last “*i*” in “*nioi no takai*” is not counted as such a *ji*; rather, “*takai*” 高い is regarded as a single *shi* (Tokieda 2007 [II], 14), because “*nioi no takai*” functions as a coherent unit equivalent to “*nioi ga takai*” 匂いが高い (fragrant). On top of this, Tokieda puts an invisible “zero-sign *ji*” (*zero-kigō no ji* 零記号の辞) between “*nioi no takai*” and “*hana*” 花. This posits an intermediating function as a *ji* that connects “*nioi no takai*” with “*hana ga saita*.” It is termed a “zero-sign,” precisely because it does not appear as a written character within the sentence.



Figure 1. English speaker’s drawing of the opening line of *Snow Country* (Kanaya 2019, 34).

These two aspects make the position of the subject in Japanese highly ambiguous. Furthermore, the inclusive nature of the second aspect, the nested structure, causes the “subject” to be subordinate to

what is expressed on the side of the predicate, making it difficult to identify a clear position for the subject as found in Western grammatical structures. Affected by these two aspects in this way, the position of the Japanese subject has been a topic of debate for a long time, and this ambiguity is widely believed to stem from the cultural worldview embedded within the language.

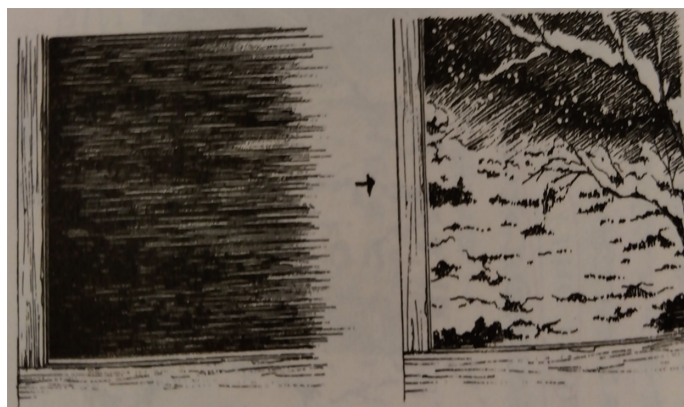


Figure 2. Japanese speaker's drawing of the same scene
(Kanaya 2019, 33)

The above figures highlight the contrasting perspectives between English (Figure 1) and Japanese (Figure 2) speakers, a distinction originally introduced by Japanese linguist Ikegami Yoshihiko. Ikegami asked English and Japanese speakers to visualize and describe the image evoked by the opening line of Kawabata Yasunari's novel *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni* 雪国). “*Kokkyō no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta. Yoru no soko ga shiroku natta. Shingōjo ni kisha ga tomatta*” (Kawabata 1947, 5). In contrast, the English translation reads as follows: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country; the earth lay white under the night sky; the train pulled up at a signal stop” (Kanaya 2019, 32).

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

At first glance, a clear difference emerges: Kawabata's original text contains no explicit grammatical subject, whereas the English translation places "the train" as the subject. In the original Japanese expression, the first sentence, "*Kokkyō no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta. Yoru no soko ga shiroku natta,*" does not explicitly mention any term corresponding to "the train." Nevertheless, it is evident from the scene that a character in the novel (Shimamura 島村) is riding on the train. Furthermore, this scene portrays the scenery as seen through a window by someone moving inside the train. At the same time, readers naturally grasp that this objectified landscape is being perceived by an observing subject. Thus, this is not merely a purely objective landscape detached from a subjective vantage point.

Seeing Figure 2, one can immediately see that the Japanese speaker depicts the view from inside the train, describing the temporal progression as the scene transitions from the dark tunnel to the snowscape. In contrast, the English speaker adopts a bird's-eye perspective, creating a snapshot of the exact moment the train emerges from the tunnel.

Taking up this contrast, linguist Kanaya points out that what has changed in this translation is none other than the perspective. According to him, while in the case of Japanese speakers, they can imagine the passage of time from an earthly point of view from Kawabata's writing, in the case of English speakers, the point of view is shifted to the sky, further resulting in the depiction of a spatial scene. Kanaya calls this the "god's point of view," while the Japanese speaker's perspective is called the "insect's point of view."

The reason is that the Japanese speaker's point of view experiences the shifting of events on the earth. This ties in with the contrast between an event and a thing or an object. Based on these points of view, Kanaya advocated the theory of "subject abolition." He insists that the Japanese

language does not need a subject grammatically. He says that the subject which is not necessary for East Asian languages such as Japanese, was introduced after the Meiji Restoration under the slogan, “Leave Asia, enter Europe,” mimicking English grammar.

Kanaya put undue emphasis on the nominative function and make a clear distinction from the western logic based on the subject (subjectivity). From this reason, his insistence has to do not only with the grammatical topic, but also with the difference of understanding subjectivity between western and Japanese culture. If that is the case, the view of “subject abolition” could lead to the abolition of thinking of subjectivity from the Japanese context.

Kanaya criticized the unnaturalness of this SVO type or SOV type of grammar for the Japanese. In doing so he advocates the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō whom I will discuss in this context. In a nutshell, Kanaya adopted this view because Nishida based his philosophy on the “insect’s point of view” (Kanaya 2019, 44–45). The Japanese language in Kanaya’s theory of “subject abolition” should be a more natural way of expressing Japanese feelings and thoughts.

3. What Does Searching for Subjectivity Mean in Japanese?

Nishida’s idiosyncratic writing style is well known. As a literature critique, Kobayashi Hideo, expressed it a “bizarre system” (*kikaina sistemu* 奇怪なシステム) far from that natural way of expressing Japanese and it is written in the most esoteric, “unreadable style” in the history of Japanese philosophy. For describing the spatial scene, there was a struggle to express the interactive movements in the process of the actors engaging with the environment, changing it, and so changing themselves.

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

What follows is not an inquiry into the validity of the “abolition of the subject” discussed by Kanaya. Instead, the main concern is how philosophy conducted in the Japanese language identified the foundation of the “subject” [subjectivity].

Now, let us look at how Nishida reexamines the relationship between the Western tradition of subject and predicate, and how it has been inherited within the history of Japanese philosophy. In doing so, I will argue that we can avoid the understanding of the “Japaneseness” of Japanese philosophy as a non-subjective philosophy embedded in the environmental world, which is easily opposed to the Western, subject-based way of thinking.

Certainly, Nishida sought to create a philosophy unique to Japan. However, this does not mean that he expounded his philosophy in the natural Japanese language. Instead, the subjectification of individuals became an issue in Japan’s modernization. In this context, he needed to find and develop a logic for forming the subject by thinking differently from the Western philosophical tradition.

In the following discussion, we will see that Nishida considered that while Western philosophy is subject-based, Japanese philosophy must understand the experience of consciousness on a predicate basis. I will focus on one more Japanese philosopher, Nakamura Yūjirō. He critically inherited Nishida’s ideas of “nothingness,” “place,” and “predicate” and reformulated them into a perspective on subjectivity that could change relationships per se.

Nishida was born in 1870 and passed away in 1945, the final year of the Asia-Pacific War. During that time, he wrote many influential books and articles such as *An Inquiry into the Good* (善の研究 1911) and “Place” (場所 1926) while based at Kyoto University. The philosophy of the Kyoto school was later formed in the 1930s by his protégés, and their philosophy continued to have a strong influence after the war.

There is also the problem of their philosophy's so called "cooperative relationship" with the Japanese war, but this is outside the scope of this chapter.

Nishida became a well-known philosopher through his *An Inquiry into the Good* written in 1911. What he attempted in this work was to reverse Western philosophy by confronting the basis of the conscious experience beyond the subject/object dichotomy. To this end, he deployed his argument centering on the concept of pure experience. Pure experience is the pre-reflective stage. I quote, "When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified" (Nishida 1990, 3–4).

In other words, a unified state of the subject and the object is found as the stage before the epistemological distinction is established. With the concept of pure experience, he argues that the dichotomy of subject and object, and the form of knowledge based on it, derive from this fundamental unity. In my opinion, what Nishida did was to embark on a philosophy that could place subjectivity in the fundamental unity, rather than something derived from it. Let me explain this with a short history of "subject" in Japan. The concept of subject is imported from Western philosophy, and Nishi Amane, an intellectual in the early Meiji period translated it as *Shukan* 主観. At that moment, *Shukan* was closely related to introspection, which refers to the ability to reflect on one's inner state of mind. Nishi translated the book *Mental Philosophy* written by Joseph Haven in 1857. Nishi says it is quite a difficult concept to translate. In contrast, the word *kyakkan* 客観 that corresponds to an object originally existed in Japan.

However, this did not mean the ability to recognize an external object; it meant the appearance of a guest, or behavior as a guest in Chinese classics. Accordingly, the Chinese character *shu* 主 means to

be a host. However, Nishi diverts *shukan* into a term for the cognitive subject.

In western philosophy, the subject as *shukan* can be found in Kantian critique in the sense of the cognitive subject who grasps external objects. In contrast to it, the subject as *shutai* 主体 indicates an actor engaged to work on objects and transform environments. According to Nakai Masakazu, a distinction between *shutai* and *shukan* began to be made around 1932 to 1933 in Japan (Nakai 1950).

4. From “*Hypokeimenon* (ὕποκείμενον)” to the “Subject”

The English term “subject” originally comes from the ancient Greek term, *ὕποκείμενον* (*hypokeimenon*) argued by Aristotle, which means a given existence before it was linguistically categorized. In Latin, *hypokeimenon* was translated into *subiectum* by thinkers such as Apuleius and Boethius, and the term comprises “sub” (under) and “iectum” (placed or thrown). *Hypokeimenon* is not transcendental, but a fundamental substance of a concrete particle without any exhaustive categorization and final determination. In this sense, *hypokeimenon* is closely bound up with a proper name. *Hypokeimenon* is ultimately that which can only be indicated as the essential “being-ness” or “this-ness” of a particular thing. In this case, it is the one which incorporates numerous predicates that stipulate it.

It serves as the very foundation that determines various individual entities. To be sure, *hypokeimenon* did not originally carry such a burdened connotation. According to Nakai, whom I referenced earlier, Plato used the term only in the literal sense of “lying underneath.” Likewise, in the Roman world, Cicero employed it merely to convey something akin to an “evident matter lying clearly before one’s eyes.” It came to signify the fundamental foundation of all things only because,

throughout the Middle Ages up until the sixteenth century, Latin translations and commentaries on Aristotle established the meaning of a “‘primordial substrate’ (or ‘fundamental subject’) that evokes a sense of solemn majesty rather than mere utility, much like the pinnacle of a spire rising above a domed edifice” (Nakai 1950).

Aristotle, stipulated in metaphysics and categorized *hypokeimenon* as that which is the subject and cannot be a predicate. For example, *hypokeimenon* is Aristotle himself. We can say that “Aristotle is a philosopher who existed in Athens, Greece in the fourth century, B.C.”; we can offer numerous predicative propositions, such as “Aristotle is a man” and “Aristotle is a father.” However, we cannot logically say “A is *the* Aristotle.” Admitted we can say, “the author of this book is Aristotle.” However, the term Aristotle here is used as a famous figure or as a philosopher. Thus, the term “Aristotle” is a general term here and is used in the predicative sense. For example, one cannot say, “Humans are Aristotle.” Aristotle is a primary individual as a proper name. The subject is the presupposed individual.

In contrast to *hypokeimenon*, Nishida developed a logic opposite to Aristotle’s in his article “Place.” In this article, Nishida explored a logical explanation of the place in conscious phenomena or a conscious field that lies at the root of human conscious experiences and underpins our specific conscious phenomenon. He relies on two dimensions of consciousness: a mirror that reflects conscious contents, and what is mirrored. While this mirror-like image of consciousness was already underpinned by William James’s perspective of the “field of consciousness,” Nishida pursued the nature of the reflecting side of consciousness as absolute nothingness by designating it as “*basho*” (place). Through this, he sought to demonstrate the mode of “absolute free will” realized upon reaching this dimension. He says that:

That which infinitely reflects itself within itself, and which, while being nothingness in itself, encompasses infinite being, is the true self in which the so-called opposition between subject and object is established. (NKZ 3, 419)

“Self-understanding” and the things that a subject perceives and comprehends are always accompanied by the reflecting side of consciousness. In other words, there is no world that is pre-divided into subject and object. Only when both dimensions, the consciousness that apprehends things and the things that are apprehended, are simultaneously encompassed and grasped within the plane of consciousness as “*basho*” does the distinction between subject and object become established.

Therefore, the image in our consciousness of a phenomenon does not exist by itself, but the mirror of our consciousness that mirrors the image underlies consciousness. Let us take the example of a movie theater. While a specific image of a movie is projected on the screen, an image cannot be projected without the screen itself. In the case of consciousness, a projector plays the role of eyes and perceptive bodies, through which numerous perceptions and impressions come from the external world. They are the sources of the thing being-mirrored.

At first glance, the act of conscious awareness might be thought of as an internal processing of perceptions acquired through contact with the external world, akin to the projector in the previous example. However, Nishida argues that there must exist a reflecting field (*basho*) that serves as a screen: a realm that projects the results of such internal processing yet is itself distinct from any concrete content and therefore capable of projecting all possible contents.

Nishida thus says, “When we think of things-events, there must be a *basho* (place), wherein they are mirrored. Initially, we may think of this

as the field of consciousness. To be conscious of something, one must mirror it upon the field of consciousness. However, we must distinguish the mirrored phenomena of consciousness and the field of consciousness that mirrors them.

However, one can ordinarily sense the image of the screen. I have mentioned that Nishida reconsidered the individual differently from Aristotle, because Nishida defined the “place” as that which is a predicate and cannot be a subject, Aristotle’s definition of *hypokeimenon* is that which is a subject and cannot be a predicate, which is quite the opposite.

So, what does the place as “that which is a predicate and cannot be a subject” mean? In Aristotelian logic based on the substantial particles, they are discontinuous with each other and the science or *ἐπιστήμη* (*episteme*) which is an ancient Greek term for science, is required to categorize them into an order. However, in the logic of place, a person’s consciousness is ultimately a place that can only be the predicate, so they are thrown into the world of various possibilities of transformation that can be predicated in new ways.

For example, I and Thou are distinct individuals (subjects), categorized with a predicate such as “human beings” in the Aristotelian view. However, we see a variety of other potential ties when we look at them in terms of predicates. For example, on the predicate side, beyond the logical categorization, I can ultimately say that I am Thou because Thou and I exist only on the plane of the predicate that contains a finite universal characterization.

Nishida developed this logic in his article, “The I and the Thou” (我と汝, 1932). “Thou” is personally independent of me. At the root of it, the “place” as the “absolute other” creates the possibility of free connectivity between “I” and “Thou.” This logic becomes thinkable in the work of the “place of nothingness” as Nishida argued in his

article “Place.” However, it is not an entity that presides over the world, like God, it is absolutely nothing. He argues. “The ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ are absolutely other existence (*Watashi to nanji towa zettai no hokanarumono de aru*, 私と汝とは絶対の他なるものである)” (NKZ 5, 297). There exists no transcendental or universal entity that encompasses both “I” and “you.” “Thou” as the ultimate other can only be encountered when “I” transcends the framework of individual consciousness and reach the “place of nothingness,” wherein “I” encounters true otherness—namely, “Thou.” In other words, “Thou” fundamentally underlies the existence of “I” at the level of the place of nothingness, just as “I” underlies the existence of “Thou.” Both converge in their innermost (non-)selves, even as they remain entirely distinct from each other (NKZ 5, 297).

5. Connectivity and History

The connection to “place of nothingness” is explored here. It is highly elusive, and at least unlike the self-evident view of the independence of individuals, and in my view, this argument suggests that one can transcend the mere categorization of being connected or disconnected and instead become an individual within the place that breaks down strict categories. Within this place, individuals can exist as distinct entities while still being interconnected. In other words, the possibility of connectivity is the premise of Nishida’s understanding, and he further says it is the absolute that works throughout history.

Nishida says in his article “The Standpoint of the Individual in the Historical World” (歴史的世界に於ての個物の立場, 1938),

The absolute must be what we are located in, or what the world is made of. It must be absolute nothingness, and everything is

composed of it and it is absolutely contradictory self-identity. (NKZ 8, 365)

What is referred to here as “the absolute” or “absolute nothingness” is infinite connectivity. First, in the predicate field, it is assumed that individuals connect with each other without substantial grounds. Second, this is called our historical world, because the entire connectivity is not only the total amount of existing relationships from the past to the present, but the totality of infinite relationships, including those in the future. In a word, history is not history unless it includes the future.

(1) The “Absolute Contradictory Self-identity” (絶対矛盾的自己同一)

Let me explain the concept of absolute contradictory self-identity as simply as possible. On the one hand, this refers to being an already constrained being in the sense that the self exists in a particular environment, or social setting, or network. On the other hand, it also implies that the self is formed by changing the surrounding environment, by acting upon it, by being affected by it, and thereby changing oneself to form one’s identity. This process continues incessantly like a person standing between self-reflecting mirrors. This is the subjectivity in Nishida’s philosophy (NKZ 8, 314). The individual is not presupposed, but the fundamental reality is the work of the “place” where various individuals interact. Individuals form themselves and one can say “I am myself,” but it is synonymous with “I am myself in the infinite connectivity.” In other words, the subject appears in the holistic connectivity of place.

Going back to the differences of perception between Japanese and Western languages, I think that there is certainly no “god” point of view here, but there is a different form of existence, existence from the

“insect’s point of view” as we saw before, which is like an insect’s point of view inherent in the environment, or the natural world. Instead, the initial philosophical question, “what is the forming of the self” is being questioned deeply.

6. Nakamura Yūjirō’s Vision of *Topos* and the Emergence of Subject

Lastly, we look at the philosophy of Nakamura Yūjirō. Nakamura has been active since the 1960s, and his theory of subjectivity also basically developed around Nishida’s philosophy. However, he reformulated it based on embodiment in a cultural and natural world. First, his view of embodiment is phenomenologically captured in terms of the inversion or ambivalence between seeing beings and being seen or touching and being touched. For instance, when I have been looking at a cat for a while, I have the opposite sense of being looked at by the cat, in an ambivalent way. In other words, the active and the passive become unified, as Merleau-Ponty once argued, as viewing or touching a tree evokes the sensation of being viewed or touched. Nakamura calls this ambivalence “common sense” (Nakamura 2000). Importantly, this “common sense” does not simply refer to a generally shared understanding in society, but to a sense that integrates individual sensory actions across the five senses.

Nakamura argued that common sense is composed of the sense of touch, muscle movements, internal organs, and so on, called the somatosensory system, or somatesthesia, because those senses are thought to extend outside the self, through our physical movements, or spatial cognition. And since humans have a body based on this common sense, the way we operate in space becomes essential because of this embodiment. The place where the self as a being sees something and is

being seen, ambivalently becomes meaningful.

Nakamura gave the example of the *Noh* 能 play, because *Noh* theater is considered an expression that embodies the “aesthetic of the vacant.” The stage of *Noh* theater is quite simple. According to Nakamura, it expresses an “abundantly expressive *topos*,” and *topos* means “place.” *Noh* performers express everything with physical movements. Nakamura says, “Looking up at the sun, the mountains, and the birds as they go,” or “gazing at the grass and enjoying the waves of the sea” are all expressed through the body. Nakamura (2001) calls it “relational performance.” Additionally, *Noh* performers must strive to project their awareness of what is behind them while looking ahead to achieve such a performance. In other words, as a *Noh* performer one should internalize the audience’s perspective in the movements of one’s body. Zeami 世阿弥, a central figure in the history of *Noh* theatre in the 14th to 15th centuries, called it “*riken no ken* 離見の見,” a perspective rooted in a flexible mind and physical acts that allow an actor to intuitively perceive how the audience sees him/herself. In other words, the performer is open to the outside and is strongly influenced by it. However, this does not mean others are superior to the self. Instead, attracting others’ attention and transforming it is considered to be required for performers. In this sense, this redefines the relationship. The performer performs within the possibility of redefining relationships. The “vacant” space in *Noh* theatre embodies this possibility for Nakamura.

7. Conclusion

Having examined the issue of the subject within the concept of place (*basho*) from Nishida to Nakamura, we observe an underlying assumption of a subject that enables the generation of potential relationships. Both thinkers struggled to articulate a form of subjectivity

that is not entirely reducible to its surrounding contextual relations. By introducing possibilities that have not yet solidified into holistic connectivity, one might characterize this as a distinctive perspective of Japanese philosophy; However, I hesitate to claim that it is an intuitive or “natural” sentiment for the Japanese populace at large.

Instead, I argue that this philosophy, while intrinsically rooted in Japan, aims to redefine connectivity within Japanese culture. Even within a place constituted by infinite interconnectedness, subjectivity can be defined as the agency to reconfigure one’s own connectivity and, through that process, transform oneself. Following this logic, one can still assert that “I am who I am” precisely through the performative act of reshaping one’s relationships and, ultimately, oneself.

References

Abbreviation

NKZ: Nishida Kitarō. 2002–2009, 2020. *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō), New Edition, 24 vols. and 1 supplementary vol. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)

Other Sources

Kanaya, Takehiro. 2019. *Nihongo to seiōgo: Syugo no yurai wo saguru* (Japanese and Western Languages: Searching for the Origin of the Subject). Kōdansha. (in Japanese)

Kawabata, Yasunari. 1947. *Yukiguni* (Snow Country). Shinchōsha. (in Japanese)

Kitamura, Hideo. 1987. “Kokugo” shisō no tenken: Zasshi “*Nihongo*” no Tokieda ronbun hihan (On “The National Language (KOKUGO)” : The Magazine NIHONGO and Tokieda’s article in It), *Hyoron Shakaikagaku*, 33, 1–23. (in Japanese)

Kobayashi, Toshiaki. 2015. *Nishida no shikō to nihongo no mondai*

- (Nishida's Thinking and the Problem of Japanese), *Studies in Japanese Philosophy: Nihon Tetsugakushi Kenkyū*, 12, 1–15. (in Japanese)
- Nakai, Masakazu. 1950. *Gengo wa ikiteiru* (Language is a living thing). Aozora Bunko (online) <https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001166/files/43833_34955.html> (in Japanese)
- Nakamura, Yūjirō. 2000. *Kyōtsū kankaku ron* (On Common Sense). Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- . 2001. *Nishida Kitarō*. Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Nishida, Kitarō. 1990. *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Abe Masao and Christopher Ives. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Richings, Vicky A. 2025. Beyond Subject and Object: Language, Thought, and Nishida Kitarō's Philosophical Contribution. *Asia-Japan Research Academic Bulletin*, 6. (online) <https://doi.org/10.34389/asiajapanbulletin.6.0_16>
- Tokieda, Motoki. 2007. *Kokugogaku genron* (I/II) (Principles of Japanese Linguistics (I/II). Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Yasuda, Toshiaki. 1997. *Syokuminchi no nakano "kokugogaku"* (Japanese Linguistics under Colonial Rule). Sangensha. (in Japanese)

ONLINE ISBN 978-4-910550-57-2
PRINT ISBN 978-4-910550-56-5

Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University